

PROFESSOR

BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

AND THE INFERNAL NEXUS



DAVE STONE

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Acting on an abstruse tip-off from the renowned paraphysiologist Dr Rupert Gilhooly (a man who, like, knows a lot of stuff) one Bernice Summerfield has found herself on a probe-ship heading deep into the Problematic Heart of the galaxy – not knowing what, or quite who, she might find.

What she *finds* is Station Control. A place that exists, simultaneously, in four hundred and seventeen dimensions, a brawling, souk-like Nexus between every world that can, or has or ever will be. And one of those dimensions is Hell.

Bernice knows nothing of the rivalries and power-plays going on here. So she blunders right into them and makes a complete hash of everything, natch. And one of the particular *whoms* she finds, quite frankly, what with one thing and another, she could quite well do without. In her current state.

Also available in this series:

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‘Now! Now!’ cried the Queen. ‘Faster! Faster!’ And they went so fast that at last they seemed to skim through the air, hardly touching the ground with their feet, till suddenly, just as Alice was getting quite exhausted, they stopped, and she found herself sitting on the ground, breathless and giddy. The Queen propped her up against a tree, and said kindly, ‘You may rest a little, now.’

Alice looked round her in great surprise. ‘Why, I do believe we’ve been under this tree the whole time! Everything’s just as it was!’

‘Of course it is,’ said the Queen. ‘What would you have it?’

‘Well, in our country,’ said Alice, still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time as we’ve been doing.’

‘A slow sort of country!’ said the Queen. ‘Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to go somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!’

‘I’d rather not try, please!’ said Alice. ‘I’m quite content to stay here – only I am so hot and thirsty!’

‘I know what you’d like!’ the Queen said good-naturedly, taking a little box out of her pocket. ‘Have a biscuit?’

Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There
Lewis Carroll

All perils, specially malignant, are recurrent. A murderer who is such by passion and by wilful craving as a mode of unnatural luxury cannot lapse into inertia.

On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts
Thomas de Quincey

‘Here we bloody go again.’

Everyone, ever, at some recurring point

1 Market Positioning

The precise location isn't important.

The location is and was, in fact, almost impossible to define in any meaningful sense. The instantaneous nature of star-jump technology means that stellar bodies are perceived in terms of known connections between them rather than in terms of physical distance, rather like the stations on the London Underground. So when the guidance systems of the commercial cargo transport *Barquentine* malfunctioned, flipping her out from subspace into physical space at random, all the crew could be really sure of was that they were Somewhere Off the Map.

All in all, it was fortunate for the crew that the *Barquentine* was a freighter, and that interstellar commerce works for the most part by direct barter. Basic cultural and economic differences between the myriad species and planets in the known galactic spiral tend to make the concept of value in the abstract all but irrelevant; cargo is valuable in and of itself, cannot be written off as an insurance loss and so every possible effort is made to get it to its appointed destination.

The *Barquentine* was therefore packed with sensors and Galactic Positioning Systems, far more so than even the most plush and expensive passenger liner – for the simple reason that tangible objects are worth more than any number of people, however much those people might personally think they are worth.

The *Barquentine* hung in dead space, attempting to extrapolate her relative position from the visible star field, heavy-duty receivers tracking through spatial and subspatial spectra in the hope of picking up any transmission at all.

Thus it was that she picked up a weak radio-frequency loop, operating on the speed of light, that in the ordinary course of events wouldn't have been picked up by anybody, ever.

'Is this thing on?' it said, in the tones of one trying and failing spectacularly to come to grips with the practicalities of recording a simple recorded message. 'Is it working – look, okay, okay. If I can handle one of those... wotchamacallit... you know, big lad with all those particles and whatnot whizzing around in it, speeding up and stuff... well anyway, if I can handle one of those I can damn well handle this. All right then. Where was I? Oh yeah, right...

'This is the astrometric exploratory vessel *Tinker's Cuss* and we're stuck here without engine-power or life-support. Captain and flight-crew are dead, and that's a story in itself, believe you me. Or maybe you wouldn't. I couldn't believe my own eyes when I saw them all – all right, Igron! So anyway, cut a long story short, our bums are seriously on the burner, here, and we could use a bit of help. Our

relational co-ordinates are –'

And then the loop cut off and repeated. If the Barquentine hadn't, as pointed out, been packed with the kind of sensor-equipment that could pinpoint a specific snowflake in a whole weather-system of blizzards, this would have been a very short book indeed.

2 Write Now

Professor Bernice Surprise Summerfield stared at the writing pad, the pristine liquid-crystal surface waiting to be imprinted by the stylus, the cursive ticks of shorthand expanding, magically, into entire words or phrases before her eyes.

This time, she was going to do it.

This time she was really, really going to do it.

She was going to write the definitive sequel to *Down Among the Dead Men* once and for all.

The reworking of her diaries a while before (at least, those sections of her diaries she had deemed proper for a general audience) had been a useful stopgap, she supposed, and generally well-received, but she'd had the distinct impression that while the audience might think this was all well and good, what they were really after was another proper book. She'd got that impression from all the mail saying, 'all well and good, Professor Summerfield, but when are you going to do another proper book?'

It wasn't as if she hadn't tried. On file somewhere in the Braxiatel Collection's data systems she had thousands upon thousands of words of meticulously written outlines, breakdowns, contents pages, bibliographies, appendices and suchlike addenda, all of them polished until they squeaked, each and every one of them pure and perfect in themselves.

The problem was, they bore about as much relation to actual content as the study charts drawn up by a student have a relation to learning something in time for the exam.

It wasn't that she had nothing to say, either – she had so much to say, in fact, that the sum total of it was simply too big to get out without doing some serious damage. The obvious image that conjured up was quite distasteful and she preferred not to think about it. Let's just say the metaphor wasn't that of giving birth.

She'd tried every way she could think of to break the creative log-jam. She'd tried automatic writing, uneasily aware that the process laid one open to the emergence of demons from the subconscious fully capable of destroying the very mind itself. The end result, though, had been a mind-destroying demon saying nothing more than 'bored bored bored just sitting here and writing things down it's getting on my bored bored bored...'

She had tried sealed writing, which is the process of writing down anything and everything that comes to mind for the last twenty minutes before going to bed, locking it into a time-delay file and only rereading it a month later. This had resulted in *month-old* passages on

the 'bored bored' theme, interspersed with five-in-the-morning ramblings about how she'd really fancied someone or other that night, how the world was full of idiots who couldn't get what was obviously meant to be a joke, how she felt a bit ill for some reason and how nobody loved her.

She'd tried various cut-up techniques, which resulted had large aubergine particularly cleated whelp parp Wednesday.

In the end, as any writer worth the name must, she had told herself to stop fannying about and just do it. Lock yourself in your room like you're last decade's trendy young thing giving up on gash, set a big caffeinated-tincture brewer on drip-feed and just write and write until the damn thing is *done*.

Bernice, with great control, forced her stylus to the pad.

'Title,' she wrote determinedly, 'to be Announced...'

There was an electronically synthesised cough from behind her. The sound bore little or no similarity to any human explosion of air, it was merely a polite little aural cue to get the attention. Bernice turned to see the floating spherical form of Joseph, her robotic porter.

'I told you, Joseph,' she said bad-temperedly, 'that I did not wish to be disturbed. Which part of "do not disturb" don't you understand?'

The floating silver globe gave a little sniff – again, without real air travelling in any direction.

'In actual fact,' he said, 'you suggested quite uncharacteristically that if I did not leave the immediate vicinity you would perform a quite surprising operation on my person. With a carrot, if I recall correctly. However, since the procedure in question is physically impossible, I thought it safe to enter with a message from Mr Braxiatel.'

'Brax?' said Benny. 'What does he want? Is it important?'

'I would not presume to say. Mr Braxiatel did, however, inform me that the matter might be of great personal interest to yourself.'

'Oh well...' Bernice glanced down at the pad, then cheerfully skimmed it into a pile of empty coffee cups. 'I've made a start, and that's the important thing.'

Irving Braxiatel seemed, in a certain sense, to be linked inextricably with the apartments he occupied, deep within the heart of the artificial planetoid housing the Collection that bore his name. It was not that he was reclusive and never left them; it was more that when one imagined him, one always seemed to imagine his dapper figure sitting in one of their plush leather armchairs, a glass of something on an occasional table by his side, holding forth (Braxiatel, that was, not the glass of something) on any subject under the various suns in a knowledgeable manner reminiscent of the older, wiser

brother of Sherlock Holmes. This was what classically-minded dramatists might call his Archetype – the peculiar and singular image by which he as a person was defined. So much so, in fact, that it was sometimes hard to recall further details to the little tableau it presented.

‘Ah, Benny!’ he exclaimed delightedly, rising with brief courtesy from his armchair as she entered, the silver globe of Joseph floating a pace or two behind. ‘We have visitors – a pair of quite illustrious visitors, if I say so myself.’

Seated in the additional armchairs, Bernice saw, were two more figures. One was dressed in a voluminous monk-like habit, the cowl pulled over his face, from the shadows of which only a protruding beaklike nose was visible. He was nursing a glass of what appeared to be soda water, with the general air of one who thought that the bubbles in it might be pushing the boundaries of sinful excitement just a little too far.

The other was dressed in the sort of ragged and dirty patchwork of garments as would grace a scarecrow after three or four tramps had gone by, swapped their own clothes for the ones it was wearing and got the better of the deal each time. Silver-grey hair sprouted wildly in every direction from his head, giving his deeply-lined face the aspect of being the pinkish centre of a corona. He was sipping at a mug of some hot meat-stock preparation, firmly gripped in both string-gloved hands as if to warm them (though the ambient temperature in Braxiatel’s apartments was perfectly comfortable) and he gave off the impression of being nothing more than the kind of derelict you’d find in the gutter of any planetside transit-station – officially a

‘transient’ but without the funds for so much as a half-hour bus trip.

At least, Bernice thought, that would be the impression if you didn’t know who he was.

‘Igron, Rupert,’ Braxiatel said, nodding to the monk and the scarecrow in turn, ‘allow me to present Professor Bernice Summerfield. Bernice, this is Father Igron Alsabalus, and this is Dr Rupert Gilhooly.’

The monk nodded solemnly. ‘Peace be with you, sister, and the beatitudes of a kindly universe be upon you.’

‘Yeah, uh, right,’ said the scarecrow-man, scratching his head. ‘What he said. Thing.’

Dr Rupert Alouicous Barnstable Gilhooly would be the first person to call himself a polymath. Actually, he’d be the first person to call himself, ‘um, you know – what’s the word – someone who, like, knows a lot of stuff.’

Historian, xenobiologist, sociologist, psychologist, deep-quanta

physicist, theoretical cordon bleu saucier, chemist, soft-shoe-shuffling terpsechorist... Gilhooly was a master of a hundred and one disciplines and in some cases the *absolute* master of them – he was the founder, for example, of the astrophysical offshoot, astrophysiology, of which he was still the most noted proponent. In all of these disciplines he was capable of conversing in the most rarefied and abstruse terms, those upper strata of specialised language that approach the purely abstract and are only capable of being understood by less than one in a thousand of specialists even within those disciplines themselves.

Such undisputed mental prowess, however, came at a cost. The human brain, however optimised, is only physically capable of processing and relaying a certain amount of information before it overloads. A mathematical savant, for example, might be able to factor complex algorithms instantly whilst being unable to tie his shoes, for the simple reason that vast areas of the brain are devoted to the one form of thinking rather than the other. A writer might be capable of producing the most lambent, succulent and emotionally-affecting prose while being an utter pig in real life, because his neural pathways are centred more upon the act of writing than on the most basic social interaction – in a very real, if personal, sense, the former is more real to him.

In much the same way, the genius that was Dr Rupert Alouicous Barnstable Gilhooly had more or less the same general communication skills as a turnip.

Strangely enough, this had never hampered Gilhooly's popularity with the general public. The more cynical and unkind might suggest that his affliction gave him the appearance of a moron, and was thus well suited to talk to the average talkshow viewer – but the fact was that his enthusiasms were utterly infectious, conveying themselves through his innate geniality in such broadcasts as *How Stars Work*, *Dark Matter and You* and *How Changing Those Twisty Little Molecule Things Inside Your Cells Can Give You Three Extra Legs and Stuff Like That*

* * *

'We were part of a, you know, research team on the science-ship *Tinker's Cuss*,' said Gilhooly. 'Looking at some really quite amazing things happening on the inside of...' (he waved a hand furiously as though trying to shake out the words he was looking for) '...those stars where you get a little red one going round a big yellow one, you know what I mean? An uncharted one. Had to use specially customised wotchamacallems, star map files, to get there. So anyway, there I was, sitting there and watching through that thing where you put these goggle things in front of your eyes... having a spot of lunch,

too, I think. Dinochicken sandwiches, with a big pickle and a packet of...'

'A Hand of God touched us,' Father Alsabalus interpolated solemnly, though somewhat hurriedly, 'from the *smelter* of the very heart of Creation itself!'

Father Alsabalus, Bernice realised, was a Votive of the Creational Event, an ecclesiastical order with a direct descent from the sort of fundamentalists who'd in the past had the idea of a giant with a big beard and a nightshirt making humans out of mud being taught alongside the Theory of Evolution. Such people had also, for some reason, tended to be extremely hot on the defensive capabilities of machines for which the only possible use was to forcibly insert a lump of metal into another human being from a distance. At the time, such people had been increasingly dismissed as irrelevant, held by any balanced and reasonable observer to be a waste of a perfectly good set of opposable thumbs.

The simple fact is, though, that over the centuries religions themselves go through a form of Darwinian selection – belief-systems that are utterly opposed to observable fact (that children look different from their parents, for example, which is all that 'evolution' really means) must either adapt to the facts, die, or end up entirely composed of the sort of clinical schizophrenics who'll believe in anything, up to and including that hamsters are in league with table lamps to beam microwaves into their brains. And since clinical schizophrenics are not the best people to be building churches and handing round collection plates, they tend to die out in any case – of starvation, or when the church they think they've built properly falls on their heads.

The adaptation, in the end, the ultimate reconciliation between Religion and Science, lay in a simple expansion and redefinition of the relevant terms. As early as the eighteenth century, any reasonable and reasonably-educated Christian thought of 'Cod' as not some physically literal big beard in the sky, but as what Rupert Gilhooly would have described as: 'Everything in the whole universe, right? All the planets and particles and whatnot, and how they all sort of fit together and work.'

The Order of the Creational Event were, in fact, some of the least spiritual people around, drily examining and documenting the physical processes of the universe since the Big Bang with absolute precision and an absolute lack of faith as such, but in the terms of spirituality – which had come to mean specific things with as much technicality as calling something a 'meson'. And with quite as much lay-impenetrability as someone going around and calling things mesons, when you don't know what a meson actually is.

Benny tried to work out what a Hand of God might mean in slightly more prosaic terms. ‘A stellar flare, you mean?’

Father Alsabalus shook his cowed head. ‘I did say from the smelter of the very heart.’

‘One of those jobbies where you, like, turn stuff into other stuff,’ Gilhooly added helpfully, ‘but on the...’ He seemed to lose the thread as he searched for the right words. His hands wavered as though caught between clenching together to convey very small or spreading wide for extremely big.

‘I think what our visitors are trying to say,’ Braxiatel cut in hurriedly, with the air of one deciding that all this unnecessary obfuscation had gone on quite long enough,

‘is that the *Tinker’s Cuss* was hit by some primal, transmutational energy. Triggered – I gather from what you told me before, Rupert – by the use of certain experimental probes? The force of discharge knocked the ship off its dimensional axis. Rupert, Igron and their team were saved by the force fields around the science deck, designed to protect their apparatus, so only that part of the ship remained in our own dimensional set...’

Gilhooly and Alsabalus nodded slightly dubiously as they personally worked out what this translation into the middle-brow and the sectarian actually meant.

‘I knocked up a, wosname, transmitter from a simple chronatonic transpositor and, uh, one of those things you record notes and stuff on,’ said Gilhooly. ‘And after – how long was it, Igron? I lost track. I do remember it was after we had that jolly interesting discussion about how eating your own...’

‘And in the fullness of time they were rescued,’ said Braxiatel. ‘The only problem being that they were rescued by an EarthFed cruiser – and while Earthlink Federation interstellar protocols are quite firm on the aid and succour of stranded people, they’re entirely uninterested in the rescuing of several hundred tonnes of data-gathering and storage equipment.’

‘The trials set in motion for us by the Primateur of All Things,’ said Father Alsabalus, ‘can oft times be harsh indeed.’

‘They wouldn’t let us take our stuff,’ said Gilhooly, dejectedly.

‘The upshot is,’ said Braxiatel, ‘that we now have an extraordinarily advanced research vessel lying derelict and in a transdimensional state, packed with data which might be worthless in one sense, but the value of which would be incalculable to an academic concern like the Collection. What we need, Bernice, is someone to retrieve it – someone, if possible, who has had direct experience with the more abstruse transdimensional states.’

The problem with having no real job description, Bernice thought, was that you could never really plan your life from one day to the next. True, she'd had the fully official and accredited Professorship and title of Doctor of Archaeology for quite some while now, but her true skills, it was considered by those who consider such things, still lay in being a general specialist. Not like Gilhooly, whose head was so filled with so much specialised knowledge that there was no room for anything else, but by knowing a little bit about everything from which she could improvise and draw upon.

(Indeed, during the time she had actually worked as an archaeologist, her qualifications in that field had been, well, completely and utterly improvised.)

Over the years, this had been the equivalent of going around with a big sign sprouting from her head reading RIPE

SHUCK. It was as if people had actively sought her out to offer her easy little jobs of work – no complications, honest – which what with one thing and another would suddenly become as complicated as hell, and like as not ended up with her stuck in some hideously convoluted and lethal situation, playing games to which she never had a chance to learn the rules.

In the way that one is always the last to know such things about oneself, she had come to realise that she was actively being used as a catalyst, inserted by some means or other into those situations, thrown in at the deep end with the express purpose of changing them for good, or bad, or worse.

Joining Braxiatel and the Collection had at least given some stability to her life – in that now she was for the most part performing these apparently innocuous but ultimately precarious errands at one person's behest. This was not an entirely comfortable thought; Brax's approach to life was more or less that of an inebriated butcher – you never quite knew which pies or how many of them might contain a finger.

Oh, well. At least this particular job for him seemed simple enough.

The ship dropped into reality at the stellar co-ordinates provided by Alsabalus and Gilhooly. It was one of the Collection's deep-space probes, capable of reaching any point in the galactic spiral arm in a single jump rather than hopscotching point-to-point through the known space lanes. Little more than an overpowered jump-drive with a pressurised cabin attached, the superstructure had been modified with bolt-on transdimensional field generators, sensor packs and a cargo-hopper containing several more field generators of the portable variety. Bernice was looking forward to several solid hours work in a pressure suit – no, all things considered, she wasn't looking forward to it at all. For some reason or other, she'd been gaining weight these

past few months despite any amount of half-hearted deciding to watch her diet, if she ever got around to remembering – and her pressure suit, which had been custom-tailored to her frame, was starting to feel uncomfortably like a cross between a straitjacket and a hydraulically articulated sausage skin.

A couple of baby-hops took her on into the binary-system the *Tinker's Cuss* had been investigating, and telemetry from the sensors guided her towards the stricken science ship on thrusters. The process was almost entirely automatic, leaving her with nothing much to do but watch the viewscreens.

In reality, a camera simply pointed out into space shows almost nothing, because of the wildly disproportionate lighting conditions and the sheer distances involved. The viewers, however, were hooked to transputronic systems which adapted the available data into something with which the human eye and brain could cope; the kind of real-time special effects sequence you'd find in the glossy-looking space-battle scenes of a holo-vid.

A lump of metal and polyceramic hung in stellar orbit; an almost perfect globe of sliced-off decking and bulkheads bitten off and contained by the faint visible-light glow of force fields. One area of the globe was flattened, where the fields had intersected the hull of the ship. Fortunately for those who had been on the science deck when disaster struck, this section of hull had contained an airlock, from which they had been rescued.

Bernice checked the read-outs. The dimensional stability of the ship's remains had deteriorated markedly since then; the extra mass of her entering them would like as not collapse the force fields and have her disappearing up her own pocket singularity.

The best bet was to realign her own ship with the dimensionally-displaced bulk of the science vessel, set up the portable field generators and use them, basically, to drag the *Tinker's Cuss* back from a right angle to reality.

There is a common misconception, incidentally, that a different dimensional set is the same thing as another world.

This simply isn't so. Dimensions are indeed involved, but in the same way that one can point in the general direction of the United States of America from the Republic of Ireland, but it is as impossible to actually do anything with dimensions as it is to cross the North Atlantic on foot.

To stretch the metaphor to breaking point, human technology in this area was on the level of a leaky coracle: it was possible to displace things transdimensionally, but the chances of being displaced into anywhere useful was of the order of one in several billion. This might

seem odd in the face of all the stories of those travelling to weird and wonderful dimensions, but the fact is that those people *were* the one in several billion, or were taken there by some inhuman agency, or were quite frankly lying through their teeth.

Bernice cut in her own field generators and brought the probe ship in line with the *Tinker's Cuss*.

The first thing Bernice saw was the ship itself, the previously visible area of it now had a huge bite taken out of the hull.

The science ship was a mess, plating sheared and sharded from the twisted frame, debris hanging in the black of a space no different, visually, from the three-dimensional space she'd left.

There were bodies in the wreckage, twisted in a way that seemed wrong for any living thing. At the current viewer magnification, that could mean that they had been torn and transformed by the interdimensional stresses or that they were simply dead. Either way, Bernice hesitated to zero in on them under magnification – she'd be seeing them up close and personal soon enough.

The second thing she noticed was the ring of beacons around the wreck, flaring and flashing through several different spectra including the visual and reminiscent of hazard-warning lights. Their make and configuration, though, her read-outs told her helpfully, were unclassifiable.

The third thing Benny saw was the... thing heading towards her at high velocity.

It couldn't be called a ship – indeed, the sensor readouts that were supposed to automatically interpret and tag objects were blinking frantically between STELLAR CRUISER, COMETARY DEBRIS and ENORMOUS SPACE OCTOPUS. As the... thing drew close enough for visual pickup, Benny could see what they meant: a massive, tentacled creature, pocked and cratered with micrometeors which had either gouged out pits of flesh or stuck, its tentacles configured like that of an octopus in full swim and gripping what appeared to be a small sun.

No, Benny thought, as the image of the... thing became more distinct. The 'sun' seemed to be the globular plasma-impact chamber of what was presumably a stellar drive, and the creature wasn't gripping it of its own accord. It had been lashed into this position on a crude wooden framework, and from the look in its multiple and panic-stricken eyes, the process had been uncomfortable to say the least.

Stuck on to the framework was a pressurised cabin-pod of glass and brass reminiscent of a diving bell, and trailing from this, streaming back in a tangle under velocity, were a mismatched and jaggedly evil-looking collection of hooks on lines. The cumulative result of all this was something that an obsolete dictionary would describe as

‘ferrangeous’. It was no wonder that the probe ship’s sensors were having a small nervous breakdown in trying to recognise it.

The communications system bleeped. The screens switched to white-noise static which stuttered and strobed as whoever was transmitting hunted for a halfway correct frequency. With a crackle, a grainy image stabilised: a humanoid with tusks and smallish, bony protrusions like little horns on its forehead.

Benny gave an involuntary gasp. She was well used to dealing with alien life forms, life forms so far from being human that they stood to humans as a mollusc does to a small privet hedge, but there was something... something indefinably wrong about this face, the lines and forms of it very slightly out of kilter with humanity on a fundamental level, for all that it looked more or less human, that triggered animal panic.

In the background of the image, she saw other vaguely humanoid forms, presumably at their work in wherever the image was from. This seemed to involve pedalling furiously on some local equivalent of an exercise cycle crossed with a treadmill and a dynamo, from the sparks that were fizzing and popping around them.

‘Blog a seki ta di namon ta loosha in ti rhomosa?’ said the face in the foreground. ‘Ta lamet sa ti noma di so la?’

‘What?’ said Benny, still getting over her moment of irrational panic. ‘I mean, pardon me?’

‘Ik!’ the face exclaimed, then glanced down in the way that people do when they’re operating some form of control console out of shot. ‘Is human person, yes?’ it continued in more intelligible terms. ‘Make to is change the word for human person, no problem. Is little changing word for human-things thing make change with much alacrity!’

The face on the screen seemed proud of itself. The mouth split into the sort of grin that had the primate part of the brain wanting to scamper for the trees and throw things.

‘Who, uh, who are you?’ Benny said. ‘What do you want?’

‘I are Akroexabor, captain of Enormous Space Octopus *Rhagrak*. We be come take you in to Station Control, prompt and with puissance and very reasonable price all same.’

3 Somewhere Else

Mora di Vasht plucked and preened at herself, noting somewhat bad-temperedly that her image in the glass still parroted her movements, as it were, mirror fashion. For most of her life she had simply never been exposed to a looking glass that did not, by a series of selective charms, show her visage as it truly was. The glass of the cabin's dresser seemed to be backed with nothing more than a layer of reflective silver – a cheap little thing, she thought, more proper to the common and the poor – and the image of her facsimile moving what appeared to be a left hand when she moved her right disoriented her a little.

The cheap reflection also made her look uglier than the mirrors did at home. The mouth was too sour and petulant, the nose a little too pointed. She simply couldn't understand why even the commonplace and poor would want a looking glass that made them look ugly.

Still, it served its purpose more or less, which was to check that her hair and cosmetics were in more or less the right places. She knew that Suzi II would have applied and worked it just so, with the micrometric precision only available to the cybertronically enhanced, but it would never do not to ostentatiously check. Minions were there to serve, and their service must be supervised.

'The gown, now,' she said to Suzi II.

'Yes. my lady.' The servant moved forward with the garment in question, a formal affair in satin and brocade and more appropriate for attending a masque than disembarking from a ship, but even though travelling incognito, Mora found it inconceivable not to make an Entrance. The general effect – a cybertronic killing machine proffering a party frock – might seem incongruous to other eyes, even ridiculous, like a panther in a tutu. Suzi H's face, however, remained perfectly neutral.

'Lace me up,' Mora told her.

The servant tightened the laces across Mora's back. The sense of constriction, bringing back as it did memories of the suffocating life in the di Vasht compound, did little to improve her mood.

'That hurt me,' she told Suzi II. It hadn't really, but she was in no mood to be charitable. It wasn't as if it mattered after all. It wasn't as if cybertrons were real people. 'What do your cardinal protocols say about hurting me, Suzi?'

'That your person is not to be harmed in any respect, my lady,' Suzi II said impassively.

'Are your punitive routines functioning?' Mora asked her servant sternly.

‘Yes, my lady. They are currently active on level four.’

Cybertrons, of course, could not feel pain like real people.

They could however be stimulated to achieve a continual approximation of it while not affecting other functions. Mora tried to remember when she had last invoked that quasi-pain in Suzi II and forgotten to countermand it.

‘Increase them to level five,’ she said. ‘No,’ she continued, thinking better of it. ‘Increase them to six.’

‘As you wish, my lady.’

It would have been nice if the servant had betrayed any emotion whatsoever, Mora thought, but then again you couldn’t have everything. Or so she’d heard. She supposed that would be one of the things she’d have to put up with, just one of the hideous dangers and hardships that came as the cost of being free from Daddy. It was a little thrilling in some strange way – she found herself actually looking forward to meeting the challenge of these new and barbarous conditions.

There was a discreet chime from the ship’s public address system.

‘This is your captain speaking,’ the voice of the captain said. ‘The pilot of the Enormous Space Octopus now towing us informs me that we are approaching dock. Passengers are reminded to ensure the correct disposal of their personal belongings before they disembark.’

Without a glance to Suzi II, whom she knew would follow without question, Mora swept from her cabin suites to find her household entourage and order the transport of her several tons of baggage from the airship and into Station Control.

Bernice looked around the disembarking chamber and tried to suppress the shaking that even now wanted to take hold of her. The sense of... well, the sense of wrongness about the people here, up close in person and in numbers, was countering every stern lecture she had given herself not to be so stupid. It was a mindless emotion, a gut feeling, and if she’d had to put it into words the nearest she’d come up with would be that it was like suddenly finding yourself amongst the Denizens of Hell.

The Enormous Space Octopus had attached its grappling hooks to the probe ship’s superstructure and had taken up the strain. The captain, Akroexabor, while seeming friendly enough, had not so much as bothered to ask permission to do this; it seemed to be some kind of expected and automatic process.

Since the probe ship had no weapons as such, Bernice’s only option would have been to fire up the engines, which might have been catastrophic for all concerned, but in the end she had decided not to. She didn’t seem to be in any immediate danger and, quite frankly, she

had been more than a little curious to find out where the Enormous Space Octopus wanted to take her. If nothing else, it might give her a chapter in *Title: TBA* detailing something entirely new.

She had found out soon enough, though quite by chance.

The sensors that controlled the external viewing receptors were flatly insisting that there was nothing there, that it was impossible for something to be there, and so it was pure coincidence that the Station came into view.

Professor Bernice Summerfield had gazed upon the relayed face of Station Control and several distinct areas of her brain had simply shut themselves down.

And several more had woken up.

It's another common misconception, held by those who hold such things, that our so-called universe – everything we know of and can ever know – is just one facet of a larger Multiverse. Which shows how much the people who hold things know, part of which is certainly not basic English, since there can by definition only be one universe, of which all putative multiverses must necessarily be a part.

People who can get something so simple the wrong way round are probably the last people to ask about comparative ontology, so we'll leave them in a handy off-term student bar between panels, discussing the minutiae of their costume-parade insignia, the finer points of conversational Klingon and the aerodynamics of fictional dragons.

There may be a disco later, but you probably wouldn't want to go.

The differing realities of actual multiverses are nothing like as simple as, let's say, alternate worlds produced by Nazis winning wars or presidents not getting shot – none of which have or will ever have existed save *in potentia*. Nor can they be properly expressed, as such, in terms of additional dimensions, molecular resonances and quantum-packet signatures, which exist only in the minds of lazy science-fiction writers.

In fact, the only human mind to ever come within striking distance of accounting for them was that of Dr Rupert Gilhooly, who described them in a string of equations large enough to fill three phone books (Business and Residential), which only he could understand, and which he expressed for everyone else as: 'Just like these other places, yeah? They're just, like, somewhere else.'

There were four hundred and seventeen of these multiverses at the last count, each of them existing on their own terms, in radically different states, and Station Control exists as a nexus point between them.

All of which Bernice would learn a small while later. At the time, she had merely seen the effect: a vortex of light skeening off in complex

tendrils. In the centre a lumpen object that seemed to constantly form and reform, space-station structures, rock formations and jade pagodas shifting and morphing across its surface as the viewers tried to make sense of it.

Making their way through the swirls of the vortex, Benny had seen, were several more Enormous Space Octopuses, each of them towing a vessel in the manner of a pilot tug.

Some of these ships had been of the kind with which Bernice was familiar – that is, pressurised canisters with some variety of hyperdrive – while some of them seemed to be, well, ships. Timber keels connected by sheets (the nautical term for ropes) to actual sheets which might or might not be solar-wind driven sails. She spotted dirigible airships, too, and a number of quite repulsively organic-looking objects that put even the Enormous Space Octopuses to shame in the general weirdness stakes.

They had finally docked in a huge artificial cavern packed with gantries. They had gone through nothing resembling an airlock, but the air was breathable. Benny assumed that it was held in by a force-field of some kind. The fact that this... place might have breathable air as a matter of course was plainly ridiculous.

The harbourmaster, an ugly and somewhat grizzled customer of the same sort as Captain Akroexabor, had demanded docking fees, payable immediately in souls, which seemed to be the base unit of currency in these parts.

Abstruse philosophical arguments upon the existence, and nature of, the soul aside, Benny did not have currency of any description, at least none that would be acceptable here.

The only tangible thing of value she had was the probe ship itself.

The internal debate had been short. Benny had the choice of selling up and at least having some money in this strange place, or having the ship impounded anyway, in lieu of fees leaving it as inaccessible as if she'd sold it in the first place and leaving her flat broke into the bargain. There had then followed a rather longer and more complicated negotiation with the harbourmaster, whereby Benny relieved a loan against the probable value of the probe ship at auction, with which to pay piloting and docking charges thus far accrued and to buy her way into one of the Clans who, so she gathered, actually ran the Station and would extend aid and protection to her for the duration of her stay.

The Contract specifying all this had duly appeared as though conjured out of thin air, and had been several thousand pages thick. Benny had got the uneasy suspicion that she was expected to sign it in blood, but apparently a licked thumb-print on a tacky little strip under her signature had provided more than enough material for DNA

identification. All the same, Bernice had been left with the impression of having signed away her life to concerns the nature of which she did not fully understand.

Now she fixed on the scene around her, latching on to the items that were familiar. This was the equivalent of an arrivals lounge, after all, and there are constants about arrival lounges, whether for intercontinental, interstellar, or interdimensional travel the whole universe and its multiverses over. The same grubby baggage-handling facilities. The same out-of-date-looking advertising hoardings that contrived to be alien from absolutely anywhere. (Benny had expected not to be able to read a word in this place, but there was obviously some variation of English in use, on occasion, if only to say things like DRINK

BIG HAPPY-LUCK ETHANOL TOXIN, SWIRLY CANCER-CRYSTALS GIVE YOU HAPPY LITTLE BUZZ and SEND SOULS

HOME WITH MAMMON MAN FIDUCIARY HOUSE.) The same grubby and travel-lagged atmosphere of general defeat that contrived to make it clear that one has arrived in the worst place all possible worlds have to offer.

Benny shouldered her bag containing the few personal possessions she had (which amounted to no more than a change of clothes) and headed for what appeared to be a customs check-in, although the sigil above it showed a metallic sun with a face as might be found on old engravings. The face itself, though, rather than the dimpled and rather imbecilic look of benevolence that such engravings tend to have, looked like the sort of sun who'd bad-temperedly give you a melanoma if you so much as squinted at it in a funny way. This was evidently the domain of the Iron Sun Family, the clan into which the harbourmaster, for a modest commission, had arranged for Bernice to be inducted.

Odd little details of wrongness aside, those waiting in the induction line were basically human, dressed in anything from basic and slightly soiled ship's overalls (Benny) to barbarian scraps of leather and fur, to the sort of glittery Samite shift that betokens the kind of mutant space monks who elevate their thoughts to universal serenity with entirely gag-inducingly sickly empathic powers. One person contrived to stand out from this general sartorial mishmash by sheer force of effort: a sour-faced, rather plump teenaged girl in the sort of massive red velvet and gold brocade evening dress that looks as though the only way to get about inside it is by way of a pair of rollerskates. This girl was glaring around at the other travellers with the air of furious spite of one blaming the world at large for being underdressed and common. As Bernice watched, she aimed a cuff at the bald woman in attendance to her – a strangely petty gesture, like a child forcibly

nudging another for not reading its mind and doing what it wanted instantly.

The bald woman glided forward and presented one of the thick sheaves of documents that seemed to be so popular in these parts to one of the figures behind the check-in desk.

This woman moved, Benny noticed, like a panther in light body-armour. Benny's practised eye noted what might or might not have been the masses of slim weapons packages under the woman's discreet black shirt and pants and saw the trceries of silver under the pure-white skin of her exposed upper arms.

The woman caught Benny's eyes on her, turned her own jet-black ones in Benny's direction, evaluated Benny dispassionately, dismissed her as no threat and turned back to the business in hand. Obviously a bodyguard for the haughty-looking girl, either cybernetically modified or built from scratch.

Benny had now reached an open spot on the desk, where an imp-like creature took her documents and rifled through them with hands like spider-monkey paws.

'So you a human, den?'

'Well we're all of us only human,' said Bernice. 'Apart, of course, from those of us who aren't.'

The imp-thing frowned with an air of one to whom inconsequentially or levity went completely over the head.

This wasn't hard, naturally. 'So which human multiverse is you from?'

'Um...' On the whole Benny decided that plain answers might be best in the circumstances. 'Which ones have you got?'

The imp considered this for a moment. 'Is you got big holes in rock with light shining in or is you got great big balls?'

'We've got big balls,' said Bernice, keeping her face absolutely straight. 'We call them planets. They go round suns, mostly.'

'Ri-ight...' The imp licked the tip of a pencil and made a note on one of Benny's documents. 'Is you got stuff to breath everywhere or is only on big balls what are called planets?'

'Only around some of the planets,' said Benny.

'Ri-ight. Is all things expanding from humongous explosion, staying in same place or going smaller into little bitty thing?'

'It's expanding from the Big Bang,' said Benny, though apparently at some point it's going to start to...'

'Ri-ight. Is the most prevalent matter in your particular metadimensional subset that of monatomic hydrogen?'

'I think so...'

The imp made a definitive little note with a grunt of satisfaction. 'Is don't get many of you people here. Can't think why. Now, is you know

how things supposed to work here on Station?’

‘Something about being given the protection of your clan?’ said Bernice.

‘Is member of our family,’ the imp said proudly. ‘Big Family of Iron Sun. Any nasty men from other clan try to hurt you, here on Station, we make big fight with ’em, you betcha.’

The imp held up a little plaque, on which was inscribed the same anthropomorphosised sun-symbol as was hung over the check-in. ‘Is you show dem nasty fellers this, they run away like little girlie boys.’

Bernice pocketed the little plaque, not entirely convinced that it was going to be much of a protection from nasty fellers of any description. ‘That’s all very nice,’ she said, ‘but what sort of help can I count on in any, uh, practical sense?’

‘Oh, we have bravos looking out,’ the imp said. ‘Very sneaky. Keep an eye on you. Won’t see ’em till you need em.

Only slightly reassured, Bernice left the desk and rejoined the general flow of the crowd towards the exit. Hopefully she’d be able to get more of a handle on things when she was out in the Station itself.

Some hopes.

When she came to try and describe Station Control, some while later, Bernice would find herself coming up against an almost insurmountable problem. How do you describe sheer chaos? If you describe it on an instant-by-instant basis, try to detail discrete images and sensations from a barrage of them, you end up with something like:

Item: a small collection of multicoloured weevils, sitting on a little tarmaline plinth with ambulatory legs, bouncing around in complex patterns reminiscent of the Georgian State Dancers as seen from a great height. No particular reason for their perpetual dance is apparent.

Item: sections of wall, ceiling and floor which are both sides of themselves simultaneously, rather like those wireframe representations of a cube of which one can be looking at the top or the bottom, depending upon what the mind decides, but in several additional dimensions.

Item: a sudden tingling in the head and the blindingly obvious idea that is instantly gone, save for the deep knowledge that the idea itself was alive, a living memory which has passed through you on the way to somewhere else, rather like a man hurrying up a street.

Item: the smell of camphor and tulips which, once again, you sensed was in some way alive – as alive as all the more prosaic giant insects, walking bears, tentacular slime monsters and all the possible variations on the basically humanoid (or at least bipedal) creatures milling in their thousands through complex spaces where down might

be up or inside-out, where apparently direct routes twisted back in on themselves like a Mobius strip, where you could travel from one physical zone to another merely by thinking about it, or be barred from a section of apparently clear space by the mind registering, on some primal level, that said area was utterly inimical to life as we know it and so reacting, purely psychosomatically, as if one has walked into a diamond-hard plexiglass wall...

In the end, Benny would be forced into simplification, in much the way that you can simplify the complex molecular interplay of one substance dissolving into another as a

‘swirl’. The interior of Station Control could, in the end, be described as a collection of enclosed places of various sizes – call them chambers – to which there were entrances and exits and conduits between. Forget all the infinite variety of the distinctions unless it was important. Call them that and be done with it.

In fact, things seemed to be settling down a bit now, at least subjectively. Nothing can be terrifying for long periods of time on account of how terrifying things either tend to stop being it or stop you and make you dead. A swarming sensorial chaos reminiscent of nothing so much as an animated multicoloured curry seen for the second time might fill your entire world for a while but then become mere background to some concrete thought or act.

The first thing to do, Benny thought, was find somewhere to stay. Off to one side she saw the spoilt-looking girl and bodyguard she’d noticed earlier. They had acquired an entourage of slight, very pale and rudimentary-looking figures, little more than living sketches of humanoid beings, who were toting a collection of steamer trunks that seemed far too heavy for their spindly frames. Some biologically-based equivalent of androids, Benny assumed, looking at their faces which were little more than ovals with cartoon-character eyes.

Attendant to this party was an obsequious-looking imp-thing of the sort who had asked her about her multiversal balls; presumably a guide dispatched to take a visitor of some importance to a place of lodging. Benny decided to follow them discreetly. She had nothing much to lose, after all.

Mora di Vasht, on the other hand, was on the point of losing her patience completely. For hours now she had been jostled and prodded and pestered with impertinent personal questions. While avoiding the giving of her own name and family connections, she had eventually managed to convey to these people some sense of her importance and had been given membership of the Metal Sun Family, or some such nonsense. A decidedly repulsive and verminous little creature had then attached itself to her party with promises of taking her to, quote,

‘salubrious and very nice place such as is great lady-personage of yourself so very much deserve.’

The multispecial chaos of the Station didn’t bother Mora unduly, partly because a large portion of the creatures here were familiar to some extent, her father having received examples of them as emissaries in his various multiversal dealings over the years – but mostly because Mora didn’t take much interest in anything outside of herself. Had she been an Earthling in nineteenth-century India, for example, she’d have been sitting in a howdah and entirely oblivious to anything other than a general sense of bustle around her and below.

‘Starsail Lodge is most luscious and high-class penzione for most honoured guests of so-high quality and worth,’ the repulsive little guide was saying somewhat boastfully. ‘Very clean. Breakfast every single day. Has many ballrooms for elegant and glittery parties, with special sets of balls...’

Mora glanced behind her, her eye drawn by something distinct and out of place in the same way that a phrase in one’s own language stands out of a page written in another.

A human woman, whom she now seemed to remember from the crowd in the arrivals hall, appeared to be following her and her party through the crowd.

Of course, there might be a perfectly innocent explanation for this. The woman might be heading for whatever squalid lodgings she might have, which just happened to be located in this same direction. Nonetheless, Mora took in the roughness of this woman’s garb, the slight sense of hardness about her demeanour, and recalled the lessons drummed into her by Karok Dna, her father’s Chief of Guards. A girl of Mora’s position and importance must be constantly on her guard against abduction (Mora had listened intently to this, on account of how it dealt with her position and importance) and upon noticing something wrong it is better to be safe than sorry.

‘There’s a woman following us,’ she said to Suzi II without turning her head, secure in the knowledge that the bodyguard would be walking a deferential step behind. ‘I don’t like the looks of her. Go and deal with her, I don’t care how...’

Belatedly, Mora realised that there had been something slightly odd about the exchange. Some tiny detail of wrongness that was more of the nature of an absence rather than anything overt, and so it was an instant before she realised what it was. She had made her wishes known and detailed them, subconsciously expecting a barely-heard ‘yes, my lady’ as they were registered, but that quiet confirmation simply had not come.

‘Suzi..?’ Mora turned to actively look at her bodyguard – only to find that she was not there. This was such a literally unthinkable thing

– like reaching out a hand for something to find that hand suddenly not there – that the shock was like a physical blow.

The details of the world around her sprang into the focus of panic: the little guide still chattering away, the drone-like minions still impassively toting their luggage; the mill of the crowd and the wrong-looking woman in it and the region through which they were milling. Mora realised that she and her party had left the enclosed spaces of a conduit and were in a kind of plaza, complicated Station-structures rising ravine-like into the spotlight sources in the encapsulating sky.

Tiny figures crawled across the walkways strung between the ravine walls, or simply leapt or glided between the gaps.

The general effect might have been mildly interesting, like watching gulls flock and wheel across the face of a cliff, or gibbons launching themselves from the branch of one tree to another... save for the two winged creatures plummeting in a steep arc, heading directly for one Mora di Vasht and seeming for all the world like nothing but a brace of hawks swooping for their suddenly fear-pinioned prey.

Benny's first impression was that these swooping creatures were demons, plain and simple. Their hulking, pustulous and crusted forms, their ragged bat-like wings gave the impression of the sort of fiendish horrors that would tear a mortal soul to shreds as soon as look at it with their red glowing eyes, wind half their victim's insides around sticks, eat the leftovers and stick needles and little knives into anything that was left.

The impression, she swiftly realised, had been caused more by the cumulatively horrid mismatch of fur and leather scraps that they wore like piecemeal attempts at making flying jackets, bulking out like buboes from a collection of buckles and straps that secured their wings. The wings themselves were obviously artificial: oiled silk stretched over spokes and each set, overall, reminiscent of nothing quite so much as a roughly bifurcated umbrella. The blazing demon eyes were in fact the result of powerful lamps affixed to either side of goggles. Additionally, each figure had strapped to the top of his head a small propeller. It was hard to see how it could provide much motive power, so presumably it was used for steering.

Underneath all of this, the attackers seemed basically human – and the possibility of *not* being torn limb from limb and so forth by inhumanly demonic entities does wonders for the moral resolve. Bernice had no reason whatsoever to care either way about the spoilt-looking girl but, when you came down to it, the girl was being attacked in front of her, and in such cases you simply have to help the victim on general principle. As the winged figures grounded and grabbed hold of the girl (who was now casting around desperately, as

though frantically trying to find something she had lost) Benny stepped forward and began to shove her way through the pale baggage-carriers, who were simply standing there as though lost without the most simple and explicit of orders.

‘No.’

The voice behind Bernice held no sort of timbre; no sense of threat or anger. It was simply saying, in the most literal way possible, that there is something that will not be. A hand took hold of her and swung her round, and she found herself face to face with the bodyguard. Now that she thought about it, Bernice recalled the bodyguard slipping away from the girl’s party in that quietly professional way that telegraphs nothing untoward. If she had noticed at the time, Benny would have thought the girl had simply sent her servant on an errand.

Behind her she heard the sounds of struggle. Before her, the bodyguard merely regarded her for a moment before bringing up a hand so fast that it did not register even as a blur...

Later, and rather despite herself, Bernice would have occasion to admire the skill and the precision of the blow.

Watching the occasional holovid adventure show over the years, it had always struck her as a little odd that the average hero could go around getting smacked on the head repeatedly, blacking out conveniently while the scenery was changed around him and then carrying on as if nothing had happened – despite the fact that in real life he’d be spending the remainder of the episode and every other on a hospital bed, in a vegetative state, while friends and family pored through the living will and argued about whether or not to pull the plug.

An impact hard enough to induce unconsciousness for any length of time will like as not, quite frankly, make a sound rather more like crunch than thud.

The blow from the bodyguard was of a different order entirely: the application of the utterly correct degree of force on the occipital ganglia calculated to profoundly stun whilst causing no more physical damage than was strictly necessary. As such, it was a masterpiece of applied violence of the sort for which any aspiring martial artist would happily trade the waxing-on and waxing-off of a fleet of rental limousines after a mud shower.

None of which, of course, Bernice was in a position to appreciate at the time, on the basis of busily going out like a light.

The winged men wheeled through the crowded air, heading for a platform lashed to the side of a galvanistic pylon and piled with a collection of mismatched junk arranged in the manner of an nest.

Waiting for them were two figures, who at first sight might seem to be generally humanoid, but on closer inspection certain rather marked differences became apparent.

One, it seemed, had lost at least half the living flesh from his body. The head was perfect, though the expression on the face held a slack, switched-off quality. His arms and legs were likewise intact and quite impressively muscular. The torso, from groin to throat, however, had been at some past point completely flayed and eviscerated to leave nothing but the skeleton. Inside the ribcage, curled gripping the spinal column with specially-adapted clawlike appendages, was a creature that seemed nothing but a leathery brain case and tentacles, ganglionic tangles of which extended up into the neck, and down and outwards into the limbs.

The other was wrapped in strips of bandage, rather like the common misconception of a mummy. The bandages were tight enough to delineate the form and face of a hook-nosed, mean-looking man almost perfectly. If you looked in the gaps between the bandages, however, you would see that there was nothing at all inside, save for two lights like glowing coals where the eyes should have been. They were, in fact, almost a match for the roll-up cigarette it was smoking.

They've got the package,' this latter one said around its slightly dog-eared fag. 'No slip-ups, it looks like.'

The brain-thing made the head of the corpse in which it rode nod. 'That's the nice thing about trained marpies. Takes 'em a while to get hold of the idea, but when they do, they really go for it.' The voice was a collection of sharp dentals, plosives and glottals, made entirely by throat and mouth, the brain-thing being able to form and modulate the words themselves but with no real inflection*.

* We shall not attempt to duplicate this speech phonetically, since not only would it leave the impression that this individual could not be easily understood, when this was not the case, but also lay us open to character prosecution under the Galactic Interspecies Relations Agreement for the equivalent of having a character saying "Lawdy, ah shore do lub dat riddim".

The winged figures, the so-called marpies, dropped their burden in a heap and fluttered to their nest, where they perched and started to keen. Although looking human – being human in every technical sense – they were not sentient and barely even self-aware. Marpies came from a multiverse where physical laws were more as they were thought to be than an immutable system of cause and effect. Birds and bees flew, quite simply, because they were too stupid to know that they couldn't – and all a man needed to be able to fly was a form of lobotomy which quite literally turned him into a birdbrain.

The brain-thing made its body toss a sack to the marpies, who shrittered and squabbled over it, then turned its attention to the

‘package’ the marpies had brought. A sprawled, bruised and battered Mora di Vasht glowered up at him.

‘Do you know who I am?’ she snarled, simply and utterly unable to feel fear in the face of this sheer impertinence.

‘You’ll pay for this. Oh yes, you’ll pay. My father will have you...’

Mora di Vasht’s eyes glazed over and she slumped face first onto the platform floor.

‘Why thank you, Mr Whorl,’ the brain-thing made its body say. ‘Though do you think that was entirely necessary?’

Mr Whorl shrugged, and stowed a large and nasty-looking brass and glass syringe away inside his bandages. ‘Can’t have her watching where we take her, Mr Sloater.’

‘Quite so, Mr Whorl.’ The brain-thing regarded the unconscious Mora di Vasht for a moment (by way of its own eyes, which sprouted from its leathery mass on extensible stalks) and made its body gesture towards the Bakelite-and-gravitite air car that was tethered to one side of the platform.

‘Shall we...?’

Benny woke to find herself being dragged out of what appeared to be a podlike automobile constructed from a hollowed-out vegetable gourd with rollers instead of wheels.

The not particularly gentle hands that dragged her were attached, by the usual means, to a pair of burly figures in the sort of suits that one only generally sees up close while leaving a drinking club at the request of the management. If there truly is any such thing as a Universal Language, it is spoken by suits such as these, and it tends to preclude argument – at least, any argument, subsequently, with a leg to stand on. The inhabitants of the suits were slab-skinned and porcine – razor-sharp tusks, razorback hair and an innate belligerence in their bloodshot eyes giving them the aspect of the sort of wild boar that can terrorise a party of stranded schoolboys into lynching the geeky one with glasses, as opposed to any kind of cute little piggy who would end up wee-wee-weeing anywhere.

The slightly concussed mind of Benny wondered why this pair of heavies seemed to be taking her *into* an establishment of some sort. Surely the opposite of that would be more usual? The flashing lights and gaming tables and spinning wheels-of-fortune reminded her of one of the casino-stations orbiting Nova Vegas Prime, though some of them seemed to have been combined with knife-throwing acts.

The place was packed with hectic multispecial life. The piglike thugs dragged her through the throng. This at least, Benny thought, might be a good sign; if they were dragging her to an untimely death, they probably wouldn’t be doing it in front of all these witnesses.

Then again, the thought wasn't that comforting. There are any number of ways to dispose of bodies completely (including, looking around at some of the clientele here, gobbling them up whole) and when you came right down to it, who was there around here to think anything at all of seeing one Bernice Surprise Summerfield once and simply never seeing her again? And quite apart from any of that, life did not seem to be exactly valuable in these parts. In addition to being quite correct about the knife-throwing wheels-of-fortune, Benny saw rows of what could only be described as token-operated Russian-roulette devices, which seemed to be the local variety of fruit machine. As she went past, one of the players rather spectacularly lost.

They arrived in a lobby and an elevator. The cramped size and opulence of the cage suggested it was a private conveyance. There was a single button of the elegant polished-brass and ivory bellpush type.

It was manned, so to speak, by yet another imp-thing wearing a red and yellow uniform and a pillbox hat.

'So which floor, den?' it said.

The thugs looked at each other, then back at the imp.

'There only two this thing go,' one growled. 'Which one you think?'

The imp-thing scowled. 'Is have to tell me. Is the rules.'

The thugs thought about this. It seemed to take a bit of effort. Benny got the impression that they weren't exactly unintelligent. It was just that their thoughts took time to arrive.

'We go up,' one of them said at last. 'We go up to top.'

'Is you only have to say.' The imp-thing pushed the button.

Benny had half expected the elevator to ascend with a clanking and whirring of archaic mechanisms. Instead it shot upwards with an acceleration that had her thinking of how old cartoon characters ended up as animated little puddles.

In fact, she noticed, both the pair of thugs and the imp-thing seemed to have a momentarily squashed-down look to them. Some element of their basic physiology? Some shift in the fundamental nature of the universe? Some combination of the two?

Benny had likewise assumed that the elevator, after coming to a stomach-yawning stop that lifted the feet off the floor for a moment, would initially open up into an anteroom of sorts. This is a bit of ingrained wisdom born of centuries of fictional narrative which somehow assumes, when one is taken to what might or might not be the inner sanctum of a cheese somewhat larger than most, that what said large cheese really needs is an extra little room where a potentially dangerous visitor can catch his or her breath, get some grip on his or her bearings if appropriate and plan some line of attack. Big Cheese not being necessarily synonymous with Bloody Fool, this is

seldom really the case.

The door slid back on a large office space, of the sort that combines a modicum of corporate-head functionality with a large slice of bachelor-pad living room. There were no windows, but illumination came from a bank of circular monitors on the far wall, some of them deactivated but most showing scenes from the gaming establishment below.

On one of the screens Benny saw another somewhat messy demise of a Russian-roulette machine player. Thus, in a vague way, she thought it seemed fitting that each one was fitted with what looked like a miniature windscreen-wiper. It would only occur to her later that it was the screens that were so equipped, rather than whatever it was that were actually conveying the images...

Seated behind an onyx-surfaced horseshoe desk, a complicated series of papers before him, was a massively broad-shouldered man in a black suit. His bald head turned to her as she entered and his mouth split open in a smile that might have been charming save for the slightly worrying profusion of pointed teeth.

‘A good day to you,’ he said. ‘My name is Volan Sleed, owner of this small concern and, I am happy to accept the honour, the current head of the Family of the Iron Sun.

‘Now.’ His smile dropped as if the strings holding the edges up had been cut. ‘Perhaps you’d be so kind as to tell me of your involvement in the abduction of our most honoured visitor and charge, Mora di Vasht.’

In the mutable chaos of Station Control there was a place where, after a fashion, things remained constant; the foundation upon which the features of the Station were built in the first place to shift and change. In abstract terms one might think of it as the basic hardware of a computer on which the files, applications and entire operating systems can be loaded, updated and, if it’s running exactly according to the instruction manual, bring the whole lot crashing down every three and a half minutes. It was not that this base state was immutable, but any change required the equivalent of taking the back off with a screwdriver – a completely different order of effort.

In reality, such as it was, it was more akin to the sewers running under a city, the decomposing mulch on a forest floor, the piles of guano that accumulate at the bottom of a cliff populated by sea birds. Direction it could be said had no meaning, here on the Station, but this base state was commonly, if not universally known as the Underland. A place where if you fell, in any number of senses, it was where you ended up.

Mora di Vasht woke with a pounding headache and a sick feeling in

her veins, as though organisms big enough to actually see were proliferating through them. There was a boil on the side of her neck where, she remembered, she had felt the needle puncture her.

She was in a dungeon – at least, that was her first impression: one of the cells her father maintained for the imprisonment and execution of enemy captives. The light came from guttering brands on the walls, which illuminated bricking clotted with a thick slime of mildew, and rusting tangles of chain overhead, from which water continually dripped.

Casting a glow rather than any actual illumination was an iron brazier, into which was stuck an extensive collection of pokers. Dark and angular forms lurked just beyond the light of the brands; forms that suggested the iron maidens, racks and suchlike implements of a torture chamber. There was the reek, overlaying the musty smell of filth, of burning flesh.

The figures she had seen after the winged men had snatched her were looming over her. Mora kicked with her heels, trying to scoot herself back across the filth-encrusted floor.

‘Now be nice,’ said the one wrapped in soiled bandages, reaching down to clutch her by the arm and haul her upright with inhuman strength. The twin points of light where his eyes should have been flickered balefully. ‘We were told to take care of you, and take care of you we shall.’

‘Look, I have money,’ Mora attempted desperately, struggling against his immovable grip. ‘My father, he has..’, whatever you want I can...’

She became aware that the animated corpse, the tentacles of the brain-thing that controlled it twitching, had laid a hand on one of the pokers in the brazier and was pulling it out. A squeak of terror escaped her. ‘No...’

‘Sausage?’ the animated corpse hissed, proffering the item on the end of the poker. ‘We’ve been told to keep you here. You may be here for some time. Can’t have an honoured guest like you dying on us – well, not until we tell you to. Got to keep your strength up.’

‘Lucien di Vasht,’ Volan Slead elucidated, his catslit eyes quite flinty in a way that made one suspect they could chip bone, ‘is of course one of the most powerful men in the substrative quantum state-vector designated seven four one point three oh four, forward slash, five nine zero, slash, upsilon kappa four one nine three seven four nine six one...’

He appeared to grow tired of this and dismissed it with a wry and massive-shouldered shrug. ‘Well, let us say he’s one of the most powerful men in the multiversal world from which he comes –

possibly the most powerful, by all accounts, what with several alliances forged amongst the multiplexal Overlords. Additionally, he has a long-standing and quite extraordinarily cordial relationship with the Family of the Iron Sun. So when his only daughter arrived – here, so I gather, to sample the renowned paradimensional exotica of Station Control – we were placed in a position of extreme delicacy. We were perfectly aware of her true identity, of course, but we decided to respect her wishes of travelling incognito and merely detailed certain of our forces to watch over her. A mistake, now, it seems. Would you like to know what these forces report?’

‘I’m all ears,’ said Bernice, casting uneasy glances behind her to the piglike thugs, who had taken up a solid bracketing position on either side of the elevator door. It occurred to her that, given the extreme order of oddness around these parts, she should avoid things that might be taken too literally.

‘Well, some of me, anyway. I have two of them.’

‘That proportion,’ said Volan Slead, a little coolly, ‘might end up being very easily diminished. Our watchers report that a stranger, from a backward and distinctly out-of-the-way multiverse, inveigled her way into the Family along with Mora di Vasht’s party and followed her, waiting for a chance to tip off a gang of assailants unknown, then rushed forward to help them in their nefarious scheme before being disabled by the prompt action of a di Vasht bodyguard and detained for questioning.’

Benny gave a moment’s consideration to the kind of questioning that would probably be involved – and then tried to think about nothing at all as visions of demon-torturers, white-hot pokers, hooks and skinning knives danced before her eyes.

‘That’s not what happened!’ she blurted out hotly, the notion of extreme heat being more than somewhat on her mind. She pulled herself together a bit. If she was going to have a hope in... if she was going to have a hope of talking her way out of this she would have to, as it were, keep her cool.

‘Well, it isn’t,’ she said more calmly. ‘And if you’re a reasonable, uh, man that should be all the proof you need. Accuse someone of something and they say no, they didn’t do it. If they start to quibble then they probably did. Well-known psychological fact.’

‘That of course depends upon the species in question.’

Slead snapped his fingers (the nails of which were stout and gently pointed, like a set of guitar plectra as opposed to being claws as such) and an imp-thing appeared out of thin air – achieving this feat in such a manner that it seemed no more extraordinary than if it had simply popped its head around a little door.

It was not that she wasn’t familiar enough with these creatures to

spot the differences, Benny decided. It was that each of them had been absolutely identical. This one was fitted out in a rather overstated military uniform, which called to mind the idea of a palace guardsman.

‘This particular imp has been bred to be what’s called a Lying Familiar,’ Slead explained. ‘We use them in a game consisting of two doors, behind one of which is a large bag of gold souls...’

‘And behind the other one?’ said Benny.

‘Trust me,’ said Slead, ‘in that you wouldn’t want to know unless you’re playing. The salient point is that one door is guarded by a Truth Familiar and the other by...’

‘I think I get the point,’ said Benny.

‘Quite so.’ Slead turned to the imp-thing. ‘Tell me, imp, are you a Lying Familiar?’

‘Nope,’ said the imp-thing promptly.

‘I trust I need not explicate further,’ Slead said, turning back to Bernice. He snapped his fingers again and the imp vanished with a puff of green smoke.

‘They do that sometimes, I’m afraid,’ Slead said apologetically as Bernice gagged quite violently on the noxious fumes. ‘It’s the diet.’

‘Well okay then,’ Benny said when she could speak properly again. ‘You’ve just got my word that I’m innocent. That’s the only answer I can give, unless you feel like torturing another one out of me.’

‘My dear woman!’ Strangely enough, Slead seemed genuinely and mortally offended. ‘Whatever can you take me for? Your guilt or innocence shall be established by due and recognised process before the Conclave of Families, and such punitive measures as prove necessary taken, but such a thing as torture is not an option.’ He glared at Bernice coldly.

‘Since you seem not to fully understand certain things, let me spell them out. The person of a duly adopted visitor to Station Control – no matter into which clan they might be inducted – is sacrosanct. It is the single unbreakable law upon which all Families agree, and to break it is unthinkable. Thus the enormity of the crime, should it be so, of your using your adoption by the Family of the Iron Sun to break it.’

Bernice furrowed her brow. ‘Let me see if I’ve got this straight. As a visitor I’m utterly safe from harm – but if I conspired to harm another visitor, as a member of your Family I’d deserve everything I got. Sounds a bit mutually-exclusive to me. Bit of a quandary and all that.’

‘Precisely,’ said Slead. ‘Although I suspect you could hazard a guess upon which side any ultimate decision might come down.’

‘Given the true importance of this Mora di Vasht of yours,’ said Benny.

‘That is a factor, true,’ Slead said seriously. ‘Station Control itself

exists, to a certain extent, on the sufferance of others. That particular multiverse is one of those with access to technologies and resources which could obliterate us entirely, should they so desire.'

Bernice could sense the undercurrent to this so far peculiarly civil exchange, particularly with regard as to who was in danger of being obliterated with the least fuss all around.

'Listen,' she said. 'I've been in situations like this before, and those who ought to know tell me I'm pretty good at dealing with them. At the moment you've no proof of anything either way – so let me go out there, try to get to the bottom of things and prove something...'

Volan Sled looked thoughtful at this. 'The more suspicious minded,' he said at last, 'might feel that would end up with you surreptitiously leaving the autonomous jurisdiction of the Station at the most propitious vehicular opportunity.'

'Having it away on the toes, do you mean?' said Benny.

'Doing a bunk on the next starship out?'

'That as well, possibly,' said Sled. 'Or the next aetheric sailing-dirigible or mole-train.' He smiled. 'I must say, though, that for myself I find myself inclined to take you at your word. But while I pride myself upon being a good judge of character in my capacity as a private individual, as the head of the Family I cannot afford to be anything other than distrustful...'

'So have me watched and followed. Send someone out with me. Handcuff me to 'em if you like.' Benny flexed her arms like a bodybuilder, consciously making her muscles relax so their tone seemed a bit flabbier than it actually was.

'See that? I've seen some of the... people around here, and I'm sure you can find someone capable of keeping a rein on feeble little me.'

This last was entirely true, she thought privately. It had been rather more easy to make herself look in less-than-perfect condition than she'd expected. Maybe it was her age or something – and just how old was she now, biologically speaking? Old enough for the early-thirties flipover from metabolism to catabolism, where the body stops just getting older and starts getting *old*? Was that the reason for the weird little, incremental changes she was starting to notice, like the sense of very slight but bone-deep tiredness, the expansion of her girth and certain other areas? Had her Get Out of jail Free card finally expired?

Sled, meanwhile, considered her proposal, sucking at his teeth in a thoughtful way that made the wind whistle disconcertingly through their spiky mass.

'Such a proposal might be acceptable,' he said at last. 'Of course, the problem is that – as I do believe I've mentioned – humans from your own particular multiverse are a scarcity here. That makes you something of an unknown quantity – who knows of what you might

be capable that I can barely so much as intimate?’ He brightened, slightly. ‘On the other hand, all other things being equal, I might just possibly have the man for the job. One of my most trusted lieutenants.’

On the desk was a clear crystal globe about the size of a clenched fist. Slead flicked it with a fingernail and it chimed.

‘If you’d please come in now,’ he said, speaking into the globe as though it were a perfectly ordinary office intercom.

A side door opened and a man walked through it. He was around thirty, dressed in a bulky leather combat jacket and heavy boots over combat greens, his features battered around a bit but unremarkable save for the sense of easy intelligence living behind the eyes.

‘Yes, boss...?’ he began, before turning to see Benny. The tiny little details of his form, those subliminal things one picks up without conscious recognition but which enable one to, for example, pick the right one out of a pair of twins, told Benny that this man came from her own multiversal world – a fellow leaf from the same twig on their branch of the evolutionary tree. After a while spent in a place where even the human forms were very, very slightly but fundamentally different (coming from different trees entirely) this sense of basic recognition was like a small physical shock inside the head.

But that was nothing, nothing at all, to the sense of recognition of a different order of things entirely.

‘Jason?’ Benny stared back at the man as he stared at her, both of them trying to come to terms, it seemed, with something so enormous that it could not be properly grasped or felt. ‘Jason?’ she said again, in what would later be the winning performance in her own private ‘Where Am I?’ Award for the Most Banal and Facile Exclamation in Any Given Circumstances, ‘is that you?’

4 The Joy of Ex

Later, even so little as an hour later, Bernice would not be able to recall the feeling. It was not that her mind shied away from thinking about it; it was simply that the feeling wasn't there. In the same way, one can remember being hit by a truck: the smack of impact that fills the world, the soaring, strangely peaceful arc that flings one into the jarring confusion of a knee-and-elbow-skinning roll on asphalt, the hour spent lying there with several shattered limbs before somebody turns up with some actual anaesthetic... you can remember all that with abstract, perfect clarity; you just can't recall the pain.

There were facts. They had met and taken an instant dislike to one another, and so of course the basic nature of their world meant that within a week they were together.

And they had stayed together, through marriage and divorce, through times so good and bad that the remembering of them hurt much the same, through months and years, in each other's company and apart – because the simple fact is that loving someone is entirely independent of liking them, trusting them, or being in the immediate vicinity. There had been a bond between Bernice Summerfield and Jason Kane that had remained, whole and unbroken, in the face of the vicissitudes of a love which by its very nature seemed to think that it shouldn't have been there in the first place.

And then suddenly, inconsequentially, for no good reason at all, that line had been snapped, sealing Jason behind an interdimensional rift which would never open again – or at least, would never open without the opening of it destroying worlds. Jason was gone from her, wholly, completely and irrevocably.

All the same, Benny had kept hope alive for rather longer than was healthy. The fact of him being gone rather than merely dead had circumvented the grieving process in some strange manner, and it had taken years for her to truly come to terms with it. And then, just as she had, a freak effect of certain universal processes had established a psychic link between them only for it to be immediately cut. The shock of it had damned near killed her – had, in a very real if very limited and precise way, driven her mad. Instead of dealing with those new mental and emotional wounds, she had merely dumped them in some dark and out-of-the-way corner of her mind where they remained, utterly ignored, still raw and fresh.

And now, there he was, simply standing there with a slightly dumb look on his face, as though he were trying to work out a hard sum or something rather than having just punched a fist through Benny's face, curled his hands around her brain and then ripped it out, spinal

column and all.

Later, in her diary, she would record that upon first seeing him again she'd felt as if she were going to faint, and had sharply pulled herself together, telling herself sternly that she was not, whatever happened, going to act in any way whatsoever like the withering heroine from some contrived and incredibly soppy romance novel coming face to face with her Long Lost Love. Indeed, this stern lecture was pretty much the version she added to the internal narrative of memory that all humans carry around with them and, so they believe, is the True Version of events.

She would never, even in large part to herself, admit that her first reaction upon seeing Jason Kane again was to storm over to him and start pounding him on the chest while shrieking 'Don't you ever do that to me again!', over and over again, like a mother scolding her child for nearly dying.

There's a saying to the effect that nothing can be terrifying or agonising for long, and that the body and mind find ways to adapt and cope. This rather glibly glosses over the fact that one of the ways the mind and body cope with periods of sustained pain and misery is to find various ways of killing themselves – but in general, when one finds oneself in drastically reduced circumstances, one finds ways to function within the parameters of those circumstances. A prison society is a mirror in miniature of a so-called free society condensed to the point where rather than murdering someone for the fortune in their will, for example, people will murder each other over a packet of tobacco.

All of which is to say that, after the first shock of terror, Mora di Vasht came to terms with her captivity remarkably quickly, her basic personality reasserting itself despite the decided lack of objects to assert itself upon. Her two captors, after feeding her, had arranged themselves by the stout wooden door, where they lounged incommunicatively, save for the occasional murmured comment or grunt between themselves. Mora had thereafter contrived to pointedly ignore them, and had more or less consigned them in her mind to the position of the ubiquitous guardsmen of her father's compound. There was not a lot of difference, really, if you thought about her captors in that sense. Her father's guards had been forever placing restrictions upon where she could or could not go...

The 'implements of torture' she had half-seen upon waking had turned out on closer examination to be merely furnishings of the most meagre sort: cabinets, a pallet bed and so forth. This, however, looking at the stained and filthy mattress, seemed to Mora to be torture enough. Even the Compound's cybertronic servants (that being

the lowest circumstance of which she had direct experience, being only dimly aware of any squalor that might exist amongst the invisible poor elsewhere) lived in conditions better than this.

It was an insult and a disgrace. And since it seemed that she was to be kept from any immediate harm, Mora had spent the time, lying on a relatively clean patch of mattress, happily contemplating what she would cause to have done to the people who had insulted and disgraced her like this.

Things such as this simply did not happen to people such as her – a given fact of life that people of a certain sort tend to remain convinced of right up until the point where those very things suddenly do.

So wrapped up in her own reduced world was Mora, that when the door of it now burst open, the force spilling her two captors to either side of it indignantly, she could not for a moment simply work out what was going on. It was like a planet colliding with a world the inhabitants knew to be flat.

(The analogy falls down a little, of course, since there are multiverses where the world is indeed flat, and where the stars are gemstones in the mantel of a crystal dome.) A pale and muscular figure came through the door, unstoppable as the wrath of angels – or, more properly, of a cybertronically-enhanced bodyguard with but a single mission in life and a one-track mind in the pursuance of it.

‘Suzi!’ Mora exclaimed, springing from the mattress as though touched by a live electrical wire, her inner self sagging with relief from the fear and tension she only realised she had been fighting desperately against now that they were gone. Her bodyguard must have turned Station Control upside down to find her, and now she had. All would be well. Swift – or not so swift, Mora thought – justice would now be dealt toward the man in bandages and the ambulatory corpse, and all would be...

Thus was Mora still thinking as Suzi II, her so-called bodyguard, gave her a vicious roundhouse slap which sent her spinning back onto the bed.

‘Shut up,’ Suzi hissed, in a manner rather more menacing than that of the walking corpse since she was doing it through choice. There was a look on her face quite at odds with the calm subservience that Mora had known for as long as she could remember: a look of outright hatred. ‘You’ll speak when I tell you to, and for the moment you’ll keep your mouth shut.’

‘When the rift sealed itself up,’ said Jason, ‘there was this period of flux, with the world transforming around me over and over again. I have no idea how long it lasted. It was like I’d pop into these whole different worlds and do stuff and then they’d change around me again.

At the time it felt like I was spending weeks or months in those worlds, and I'd come out with the memories of it, but I'd come out no older and physically unchanged...'

'The Gilhooly Theory of Transdimensional Contrivance,' said Bernice.

'Do what?' said Jason.

'You wouldn't know about it,' Benny said. 'It was after you went away. Dr Rupert Gilhooly was trying to explain it on some holovid chatshow or other, the interviewer said something like, "oh come on, that sounds like the sort of contrivance you get in crappy old adventure stories to explain why the heroes always seem to stay the same age", and the name just sort of stuck. It just means that if you end up dislocated in time or in some other dimension, the physical processes of ageing go on hold because you're not on your own timeline.'

'I can see what that interviewer meant,' said Jason. 'As an explanation, it doesn't make any kind of sense whatsoever.'

'It doesn't need to make sense,' said Benny. 'It just happens. As I know from personal experience. I mean, how old would you say I am?'

'Uhh...' Jason got the distracted look of one trying to change the subject in the face of a no-win situation. Their last argument was still too fresh to risk another one quite so soon.

After Benny had collected herself a little from the shock of his sudden appearance, she had been utterly, toweringly furious – both at Jason and Volan Sled. How could they have done this to her, put her through all this, all the while no doubt laughing at her up their sleeves? Both Jason and the head of the Iron Sun Family had tried to protest their innocence – that Jason had not known her true identity and, so far as Sled himself was concerned, Bernice had simply been a woman from his lieutenant's original multiverse – but Bernice had only been halfway convinced.

Now she and Jason were in Jason's living quarters, which were cluttered and lived-in but had the nondescript, impersonal air of one whose life was more in himself than his surroundings. Jason continued with his story, rather than even begin to essay the potential minefield of the Guess the Age of the Summerfield game:

'Eventually I ended up in this... place, I suppose you'd have to call it. Instead of planets in a vacuum they had bubbles in an infinity of rock. You got around by these sort of Jules Verne mole-machines strung together in trains It was Hell.'

'I can see how that must have been incredibly hard for you,' said Bernice with a not particularly notable amount of sympathy.

'No, I mean really Hell,' said Jason, 'with demons and monsters and stuff – or at least, what the human idea of Hell might be like if it

really existed.’ He thought about this for a moment. ‘Well, you know what I mean. It’s a proper place, with a history and post-industrial development. They’ve got the equivalent of computer systems and space colonisation – bubble colonies, I suppose – and they get really shirty when people find themselves there and expect them all to be whipping out the pitchforks...

‘Anyhow. For a while I did this and that, and then I started working for this Ur-demon called Agragazar –’

‘What, torturing damned souls and so forth?’ said Benny.

‘That doesn’t seem your style, somehow.’

‘Oh yeah, right, sticking red-hot pokers up the spirits of bad people sent to us by the Lord God Almighty,’ Jason said sarcastically. ‘Actually, after the failure of... well the project I was originally hired for fell through – not because of me screwing it up, so you can put that eyebrow down again, sweetheart, thank you very much – I basically did this and that again, working off my Contract, running errands and such. The Ur-demons are more or less in charge of things over there and have any number of interests. Then Agragazar was replaced by Sled – he wasn’t killed or anything and it wasn’t a coup; it’s all a bit complicated – and Sled turned his attention here to Station Control. One of the hats Agragazar wore was as the leader of the Iron Sun Family, apparently. He’d been neglecting it and delegating things... but that was the position Sled was interested in most. It’s the most demon-heavy of the clans here and the ideal toe-hold for expanding his influence in the universe at large.’

‘Sled mentioned you were one of his most trusted lieutenants,’ Benny said thoughtfully. ‘I take it that’s the equivalent of the sort of Vice-President who answers the phones?’

Jason shrugged. ‘Let’s just say I was in the right place at the right time to do him a favour, and he was grateful enough to elevate me to a position where I have a few responsibilities.’ He regarded her seriously. ‘One of which is to keep tabs on you and try to help you prove your innocence in this abduction thing. So did you do it?’

It took a moment for Benny to realise that he was deadly serious.

‘You’re not joking, are you,’ she said at last.

Jason shook his head. ‘There are some extra subtleties and complexities in the way things are done around here, but in a nutshell I’m a sort of cross between your advocate and a parole officer. That’s my function in this. And, like a lawyer, I have to be sure in my own mind that you’re telling the truth. I have to hear the words. Are you involved with this abduction or not?’

It was at this point that something which had been nagging at Benny’s mind made itself clear. After her initial outburst in Sled’s office she had talked with Jason in a friendly enough but rather

distant manner, more appropriate between acquaintances than friends, and certainly not lovers – ex or otherwise. For herself, this was because she was still largely in a state of shock, had no idea what she was supposed to be thinking or feeling and so was trying to keep things cool until she had a chance to sort it out. Without thinking much about it, she had just naturally assumed that Jason would be feeling the same way.

Now, looking at him, she could detect nothing but a man doing a job, and keeping things on a friendly enough basis so he could do it. She recalled what his reaction had been upon first seeing her again. Simple startlement and then thoughtfulness. Nothing more.

Nothing more at all.

‘Jason...’ she said. ‘What is this? You’ve known me for years...’

‘And it’s been years since I’ve known you,’ Jason said simply. ‘A lot of things can happen in that time, whether you get any older in it or not. For all I know you’ve gone to the bad. Or the kidnapping is a part of some situation which, by your lights, makes you one of the good guys. So I need to hear the words.’

‘I have no involvement with it.’ Benny all but spat the words.

Jason nodded slowly. ‘Okay. I’ll buy it.’

‘You’re too, too kind,’ Benny said in a voice that would solidify liquid nitrogen, possibly to make up for a hot and slightly stinging sensation that had suddenly appeared behind her eyes. ‘I’m so glad.’

‘So what’s your first move?’ Jason asked. ‘Where do you want to start?’

Benny turned things over in her mind, slightly grateful for the chance to concentrate on some specific problem which at least might have a solution, rather than the sort of personal problems which in the end just hurt.

‘I think I want to talk to the so-called witnesses,’ she said.

‘The di Vasht girl’s bodyguard, the one who seemed so hot on protecting her from people who just happened to be trying to help. Where is she?’

‘She’s dropped out of sight,’ Jason said. ‘Even the watchers can’t pin her down. My guess is that she’s conducting her own investigations. It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to get in her way in any case.’

‘All right,’ said Benny. ‘What about that imp-thing acting as a tour guide? It was on the spot when the attack took place. What did it see?’

Jason frowned. ‘We don’t know. It hasn’t been seen around either.’

Benny looked at him. ‘And don’t you find that in the least bit suspicious?’

Jason shrugged. ‘You summon ’em, tell them to do things and they go away again when they’ve finished. Who knows where they go?’

Benny thought again. ‘All right, so what about these “watchers” you

keep going on about. I want to talk to them. Perhaps one of them saw something, some little detail and forgot to report it...'

Jason shook his head. 'You have to understand that the watchers aren't people. They're not even things as such. Watching and reporting is just what they are, if you get me – you can't question them or prod their memories, they just report what they see and that's it.'

'So what you're basically saying,' said Benny, 'is that there are no available witnesses.'

'That's about the size of it,' said Jason.

'Oh-kay. So what about the starship the di Vasht girl arrived on? Did she have a cabin or such? Can we search it for clues as to who might or might not have it in for her? Other than in general, I mean.'

'It's still in dock, yes,' Jason said. 'Though it's more like an airship than a starship. Mora di Vasht came from one of those multiverses permeated with breathable air. We've had the cabins searched. No clues whatsoever – at least, no clues which haven't been diligently cleaned out by the maid service.'

'I still want to see it,' said Benny.

Jason sighed. 'I don't think you've quite grasped the nature of Station Control. It's a nexus point, right? You can enter it from your own particular multiverse and leave, but you can't cross over into another multiverse except under very special circumstances. Here and now, those circumstances simply don't obtain for you. You'd' end up trying to cross into a world where it is flatly impossible to exist, and so of course you suddenly wouldn't – extremely messily, apparently, in a lot of cases.'

It was Benny's turn to sigh. 'You're not making life any easier, you know? All right. I can't get a look at where she came from. What about where she was going? They were going somewhere before the attack. Where was the imp-thing taking her?'

'The Starsail Lodge. It's in a relatively stable habitation zone run by some of Sleed's contacts. The Iron Sun tend to use it for the sort of VIP's who don't want too much attention.'

'Can I see it? Or has it suddenly vanished like just about everything else? Or will I implode up my own actuality or some such by simply stepping through the door?'

'You can see it,' said Jason. 'I don't really see the point, though. I mean, Mora di Vasht never even got there...'

'Yes, well,' said Benny sourly. 'Given the whole vast panoply of options currently open to me, it's the only place left for me to go.'

'You don't care, do you?' Suzi II was bristling (or would if she had hair) with pent up fury. There was the general air of one venting a carefully measured amount of steam – she was literally shaking with a

sense of restraint barely capable of preventing an explosion into violence. Her face was a fixed, cold snarl. 'It isn't just that you have no idea, that you don't know how things work – you just don't care.'

Mora di Vasht, still panicked by this complete reversal in an element she had thought rock-solid, started to babble something about how she did care, she really did, if someone would tell her what she was supposed to be caring about. Suzi II slapped her again, hard enough to sprain a muscle in her neck with whiplash.

'You will speak,' said Suzi II, putting her face very close to Mora's and glowering, 'only when I give you express permission. Do you understand?'

Mora looked into the cold face of her ex-bodyguard and then nodded. 'Yes.'

For a moment she thought that this latest slap had taken her head clean off its shoulders.

'Hey, listen,' said a voice off to one side through the ringing in her ears; probably the bandage-wrapped man, Mora thought muzzily, due to the lack of hissing, 'We're not supposed to mark her up. Not yet...'

'Do you understand?' Suzi II said again, her face still very close to Mora's.

Mora nodded mutely.

'Good.' Suzi II backed off a little and continued her diatribe: 'You know where your servants come from? The children of settlements razed by your father's wars. The compounds he annexes. We're as human as you are. They take us and torture us, implant us with machines and wire us for obedience. Only, those control mechanisms can be shorted out.'

Suzi II stepped forward again and prodded Mora with a finger. 'When my new master visited your father's compound and met me, disabled the control centres that held me, I wanted to kill you there and then. But he had plans for you – *has* plans for you – so for the moment I have to keep you alive. Not for too long, though.' She smiled as though anticipating a treat. 'Then I get to play with you.'

They travelled to the Starsail Lodge by way of a large, tiered platform which stalked through the crowds and chaotic topography on a set of spindly legs, which terminated in claws capable of grabbing on to any available hand-hold. It seemed to be the Station Control version of an omnibus, although no driver, ticket collector or actual controlling mechanism could be seen.

'Are you sure this is right?' Benny said, the human and alien forms of other passengers jostling her. 'The di Vasht girl and her party were on foot, so it shouldn't have been very far.'

'The components and zones here on the Station tend to sort of

switch around and shuffle themselves when you're not looking,' Jason explained. 'It's a bit like nipping down to the corner shop, sometimes, and then finding you have to take the London to Carlisle sleeper back. It doesn't make that much of a difference. If you know a place, you know how to get to it...'

'How's that?' Benny said. She wasn't literally asking how that happened, she was asking Jason what the hell he was talking about and if she had heard him correctly.

'It's like the world's constantly transforming around you, including the directions to the landmarks you know,' Jason said, taking her literally. 'If you know of something, then all the secondary information that leads you to know of it, here and now, shifts around to fit – because here and now that's the only way you can know of it. Give it a go. Think how you can get back to somewhere you know.'

Benny gave it a go, thinking how she might get back to Volan Slead's gaming house, that being one of the grand total of two places she had actually been conversant with since entering the Station. She realised that – though she seemed to remember them leaving the gaming house, crossing a concourse and several walkways to the stalking-platform machine – she now knew deep in her bones that the way back to it would involve a collection of crawlways and a rope-bridge in a completely different direction from where she had previously thought the gaming house to be.

'Probably best not to think about it too much,' said Jason, noticing the look on her face. 'I mean, you can go on about interdimensional states of flux and the polyfractal intercorrelation of quanta until your head aches and you'd be no nearer understanding it. It's just something that happens, and the best thing to do is just deal with it and get on with things. It's a bit like the language, come to that.'

'Language?' Benny said.

'Yep. Haven't you found it a bit odd that everybody seems to be speaking English? They're not. It's like you talk to people and the world itself changes so they understand you. Cod alone knows what we'd be sounding like if we suddenly found ourselves back in our own world...'

A thought which had been bubbling away in the back of Benny's head now chose this moment to make the mental microwave go ping. It was slightly uncharacteristic and not to say unworthy of her, but she decided to let it out and try the taste.

'It occurs to me, Jason, that if you're supposed to be keeping tabs on me, we could both make a break for it and no one would be any the wiser until it was too late. I mean, it's all very sad about this di Vasht girl and so forth, but when you come right down to it she's none of my concern.' And simply cutting and running without a backwards

glance would be just her ex-husband's style, she added privately.

She realised that Jason was looking at her with the sort of expression commonly reserved for something on the sole of the shoe.

'I told you I had responsibilities,' he said, a little stiffly.

'There's such a thing as loyalty and keeping your word – and at this point I really don't have much else left.' He relaxed a little and grinned, a ghost of the devil-may-care Jason she had known years before briefly reanimating. 'Besides, I'm still under Contract – and believe me, if there's one thing the people from the infernal multiverses know about, it's Contracts. I might not have signed it in blood and signed away my immortal soul with a capital S, but the Contracts have a real and quite literal power.'

Jason shrugged in a sort of way that conveyed he was physically moving his body through a kind of invisible but very real obstacle course of constraints. 'And besides all that, do you know which direction our own world is in? Exactly? I certainly don't. Twist into the general dimensional set of the Station and automatic processes cut in to take you the rest of the way; without fixed and precise co-ordinates going the other way you could end up... and here we are.'

The stalking platform was coming up on what in a Gothic Romance might be called a fearful pile – though a fearful pile of what, it was difficult to say. On first sight it looked like a massive shipwrecked galleon plastered over the steel wall of a cavern-chamber... but that impression was the result of the confusing tangle of spars, hawsers and sail-like canopies that made up its construction rather than it being the result of a seafaring – or any other kind of – vessel at all. Lodged in the tangle were globular forms that may or may not have been living spaces, the equivalent of cabins or rooms. They were linked by an interconnecting series of access tubes, the whole giving off a rather queasily intestinal impression as though the nonexistent sailing ship had become entangled with the guts of some equally impossible sea-monster before running aground.

'It's all right for some,' sniffed Jason, looking up at the twisted monstrosity. 'I'll say this for Volan, he really knows how to keep his guests in the lap of luxury.'

Bernice didn't reply. Now that she was actually here, she was trying to work out what it was she could actually do. A thought occurred to her.

'The kidnapping,' she asked Jason. 'How many people really know about it?'

'Not that many,' Jason said. 'Volan's hoping we'll get some break, something he can give a bit of spin before he has to tell the father.'

'All right,' Benny said, swinging herself down from the stalking platform, which had been waiting for them to disembark with an

inanimate air of patience, and on to a walkway built from some alien variety of bamboo. ‘Follow my lead when I go in there and back me up. I have a plan.’

Actually, she admitted to herself, she’d less than half a plan – the remainder being made up of one part wishful thinking to three parts sheer desperation. She put on her most imperious manner and stormed through the globular entrance hall of the Starsail Lodge, snapping her fingers at a large bicuspid arthropod in a splendidly frogged and braided uniform that either meant that it was a general or the suchlike dignitary in his own world, and thus she was about to cause an intermultiversal incident, or it was a hotel porter.

‘You there, chappie!’ she proclaimed, pitching her voice in a loud and piercing manner similar to that which she had once described as woman-with-a-plum-up-her-bum. ‘Tell me where I can check into your no doubt fine establishment, considering. My name is Mora di Vasht, and I believe I have a reservation. That’s Mora di Vasht, incidentally, which is my name.’

Jason was looking at her, momentarily, as though she’d gone round the twist. He recovered himself and shrugged with the air of one who has simply given up bothering.

The arthropod merely pointed, in an appropriately arthropedic manner, to what was quite obviously a reception desk, behind which sat a stunningly beautiful young lady in the sort of low-cut uniform and cap that would not look out of place as a costume in the sort of revue bar where they give you a quick flash but don’t actually strip.

‘Why thank you,’ Benny said kindly, courteously and above all loudly. ‘That is, Mora di Vasht – which, I think I might already have mentioned, is my name – thanks you.’ She snapped her fingers to Jason. ‘Come, minion.’

Bernice swept over to the reception desk in a manner that suggested her finest gowns and frocks were in the wash and that a dirty and and by now somewhat ragged-looking jumpsuit were de rigueur, actually, from where she came.

The receptionist, who seemed human, gave a sunny smile at the repeated mention of the name Mora di Vasht and typed rapidly on what appeared to be a collection of Underwood typewriter keys protruding from the carapace of a large beetle. Benny, used to reading faces, could detect absolutely nothing but cheerful helpfulness.

Jason, she noticed, off to one side, was surreptitiously trying to get a look down the top of the receptionist’s uniform.

‘Ah yes...’ the receptionist said, looking at the large beetle’s display, which was a little blackboard on which it had scribbled something with a stick of chalk and held it up for her perusal. ‘You’re in the special suite.’ She glanced about to make sure that there were no

further guests in need of attention. 'Come this way.'

The receptionist hopped off her stool. Her legs, which had been concealed by the desk, were basically a pair of big hairy flippers directly attached to her hips. She waddled around the desk and led Benny and Jason to what appeared to be a bank of large pneumatic mailing tubes, but which on closer inspection turned out to be built to accommodate several people at a time.

'Please keep your hands inside the capsule,' she said cheerfully, assisting them, naturally enough, into one of the pneumatic capsules. 'Have a good trip.'

She pulled a lever, there was the thump of compressed gas and the capsule shot upwards, presumably into the twisted network of tubes Bernice had noted earlier, at breakneck speed.

In the chamber where Mora di Vasht was being held, there was a ringing sound like that of an old-style telephone. From within himself the bandaged man produced the object from which it had issued: a portable communications device that seemed to have evolved from a cross between a field-radio and a gramophone. It had a miniaturised listening horn and a crank.

The bandaged man duly turned the crank and listened.

'There are people asking questions up top,' he said at length. 'They're using her name –' this with a gesture towards Mora – 'and making a lot of noise.'

'Is that a problem?' Suzi II flexed her arms, pleased at the prospect of some new violence. 'You want me to go and deal with them?'

The bandaged man relayed this into his communicator, then listened again.

'No,' he said at last. 'Our master has been counting on something of this nature and has plans in place for it. They're being dealt with even as we speak.'

The suite was a collection of largish globe-interiors, connected at the points where the globes were squashed together rather like a pound of oranges in a bag. Round windows looked out upon the chaos of the Zone which the Starsail Lodge currently inhabited: it was possible to make out landmarks like a tower with a particular shape, or what looked like a free-standing archway built from bones. Such landmarks tended to shift their positions around within the overall enclosing chamber, though, in a peculiar way that meant you never actually saw them move, but when you turned away and then turned back they were in a different position – a position, you knew, that they had always occupied, even though they had only always occupied it for the last few seconds.

The interior of the suite recalled the rooms you find the known

universe over, in hotels with the prefix 'Inter-', no matter whether the suffix is 'national', 'continental',

'galactic' and in all probability 'dimensional'. Fixtures and fittings modelled to fit its globular nature, however, give it the disconcerting look of being viewed through a fish-eye lens.

Standing there impassively, still carrying their cargo of luggage, were the thin, pale humanoids who had served Mora di Vasht as porters. Sitting on the floor, its head cradled miserably in its hands, was the little imp-thing who had been acting as a guide.

'What the hell. you should pardon the expression, are you doing here?' Jason demanded. 'The Iron Sun Family have been looking for you all over.'

The imp-thing looked up. 'Was told to take people here,' it said simply. 'Was not told what to do if one go away with flying-thing people, so took rest of people here.'

Jason nodded to himself and shrugged. 'You have to tell 'em what to do,' he reminded Bernice. 'Anything unexpected happens and they have to deal with it within the parameters of the orders they've already been given. It's a bit like those old stories about summoning a djinn.'

'I understand,' said Benny. 'Chocolate malted shakes and twelve-inch pianists. Like the man who said "beggar me" when the genie first appeared...'

'And ended up – oh, you said beggar. Right. Yes. And suddenly found himself begging on the street.' Jason turned back to the imp-thing. 'So what have you done since you got here?'

'Nothing!' The imp seemed wretchedly indignant, as though the very world had been conspiring to insult it on a deep and personal level. It pointed at the collection of porters. 'Have waited and waited and waited for thin white men to say what to do and is nothing!'

'Tell you what,' said Jason kindly. 'Why don't you have them unpack so we can go through their luggage?'

It was as though the imp-thing had been galvanised by the simple fact of being told what to do. It shot to its feet and began snapping half-coherent orders at the porters, who simply and automatically began to comply.

'That was your plan, right?' Jason said to Benny as they watched the ensuing bustle. 'Find her luggage and search it for clues...'

'How on earth would I have been able to plan that?' said Benny, loftily, regarding the bustle (which had been the first item of clothing unearthed from a steam trunk by a porter) without much interest. 'I hadn't the faintest idea that the luggage would be here. My intention was simply to assume the identity of this di Vasht girl and see what happens. And speaking of which...'

By the doorway through which they had entered was a rubber speaking-tube with a brass mouthpiece and whistle-stopper. Benny blew into it, then held it to her ear until she heard a response.

‘Room service?’ she said at length. ‘This is Mora di Vasht. I’d like a big trolley piled with the most scrumptious things imaginable sent to my suite.’

‘Is this your idea of a good idea?’ said Jason.

‘Well, I haven’t eaten in...’ Benny tried to factor the peculiar timeframe of Station Control and failed. ‘Well, I haven’t eaten. Ordering a big pile of the most scrumptious things imaginable is probably the best idea I’ve ever had.’

‘I meant,’ said Jason pointedly, ‘that any fiendish kidnappers in the vicinity are going to know that you’re not the real Mora di Vasht, however much you say you are, on account of them already having the real one. What possible use will pretending to be her and ripping off her credit-balance achieve?’

‘Well, I get to use her credit-balance for starters,’ said Benny. ‘And don’t you dare attempt to look down your nose at me, Jason Peter Kane, after the number of strokes I know for a fact that you’ve pulled. I seem to remember you making and losing a fortune several times over with things like timeshare deals and alien pornography...’

‘Hey,’ said Jason, ‘that so-called pornography had genuine literary merit.’

‘Which is precisely why the people who bought it complained.’ Benny looked across the room to where the imp-thing was determinedly chivvying the porters along in their work. She noted that neither imp nor porters seemed to have quite got the idea of putting things away, so that the various items of clothing and personal possessions now covered every available surface in tidy piles rather than being stowed in closets and drawers. Oh well, she thought, at least they seemed happy enough to be doing something.

There was a knock on the door. Benny opened it to reveal a kobold (which it probably wasn’t, that just being the name that it reminded her of in her head) in a white steward’s jacket, wheeling a trolley. Plates of canapes, a bottle in an ice bucket and suchlike other appropriately scrumptious-looking things were arranged around a large salver covered with a silver dome, from which could clearly be heard the sound of ticking.

‘Aha!’ Benny cried, rounding on the kobold and pointing a finger of heroic accusation. ‘You are no doubt a fiendish assassin, sent by our villain to wipe out those who might meddle in his plans! Tell us who you work for, or it’ll go the worse for you!’

It was only later that Benny would wonder, quite, what had made her act in such an extraordinary manner – berating an ostensive

assassin in this way should in any real world have had said assassin simply turning around and killing her. In the end she put it down to general lack of sleep, which for a moment had her losing herself in the sort of internally heroic story where, for example, a child proves conclusively that the schoolyard bully has stolen his gym kit, genuinely expects the bully to say something like ‘all right, you’ve caught me out’ and is surprised when the bully knocks him down and jumps up and down on him. All in all it was quite fortunate that the kobold merely looked at her uncomprehendingly and held its hand out for a tip.

Jason, meanwhile, had mooched over to the trolley and lifted the dome off the salver.

‘Swamp-lobster from the Vehicular Protectorates,’ he said.

‘One of those places where the whole multiverse is just a single flat world – endless swampland and marshes covered by a network of autobahns, apparently. They’re quite a delicacy, so they say. The lobsters I mean, not the autobahns.’

Benny looked down at the multitude of horrid things. The horridness of them was not alleviated by the fact that they were still alive. It had been the snapping of their multiple sets of pincers which had given the impression of clockwork.

‘I think I’ve lost my appetite. Take it away,’ she told the kobold, making quite clear by way of a haughty nose in the air that it wasn’t going to get so much as a second thought, let alone a gold soul out of her. That would be perfectly in character, she told herself, for the sort of person she assumed Mora di Vasht to be.

Jason slipped the confused-looking kobold a couple of small-denomination plaques.

‘She’s a vegetarian. Not quite right, you know?’ he said, knocking a knuckle against the side of his head in one of those gestures that are known the whole universe over.

Benny debated with herself whether or not to treat him to a similarly universal gesture, before deciding that such a thing would be quite, quite beneath her.

‘Are you just going to hang around here making an idiot of yourself like this?’ said Jason after the kobold and his trolley had left. ‘Only we don’t have that long until your Conclave hearing, and we’re not going to get very far if you start treating everybody like they’re a henchman from an old James Bond movie.’

‘Well I wouldn’t be surprised if that sort of thing really had happened,’ Benny said. ‘Given that things can get so weird and strange around here, why shouldn’t something like that happen?’

‘There’s a difference between “weird” and “strange” and completely and utterly ridiculous,’ said Jason. ‘Things like that simply don’t...’

‘Did you hear that?’ said Benny as a thin whistling sound made itself evident.

‘That’s just the speaking tube,’ said Jason. ‘Probably the management wanting to have a quiet word about unwarranted insults to the room-service staff.’

Bernice turned to look at the speaking tube. The sound was indeed coming from it, so it was an instant before she realised what was wrong.

‘Why is it coming from the tube,’ she said, ‘when I didn’t replace the stopper that would make the sound?’

She was answered almost immediately. The sound rose in pitch and volume, and then there was a pop as a tiny humanoid creature squeezed itself out of the tube in much the same way as a mouse can squeeze through a hole the width of a ballpoint pen. It was dressed in a black and all-concealing suit – and closely followed by several hundred of its similarly attired fellows, spilling from the tube in such a catastrophic rush that it physically burst with a bang.

‘Oh dear gods,’ Jason breathed, staring at the little things in alarm as they milled about on the carpet like a kind of mobile oil slick. ‘We’ve done it now. It’s a Whistling Ninja!’

‘Do what?’ said Benny, because, in the end, there are only a certain number of responses appropriate when suddenly confronted by people who go around saying ‘Whistling Ninja’. ‘What are you ..?’

‘No time!’ Jason was already diving for one of the windows, which now looked out upon a vista of pagoda-like constructions traversed by Montgolfier balloons.

On the floor, with squeaky cries of ‘hup!’ and ‘hooplah!’, the little men were rapidly forming themselves into a kind of clotted human pyramid – a description rather more apt than the obvious, because already the combined mass of them seemed to be flowing together and transforming, taking on the aspect of a single figure fully half the size again of a human man. The floor creaked under its weight, as though its mass was in some impossible way now greater than that of its component parts. It now blocked all access to the door.

The only way out, it seemed, was a window.

Jason, however, had come up against another universal constant as relating to the windows in any high-up place of lodging – ie that they’re designed to make the breaking or opening of them enough to jump out very hard indeed.

‘No go,’ he said, his voice taking on a kind of half-cornered animal snarl. ‘We have to find some other...’

Benny, meanwhile, was staring with shocked fascination at the now almost entirely congealed human form as it cast around slowly, inexorably, searching out a target. It locked on to her. A circular form

bulged out from its head and solidified; it looked something like the bell end of a trumpet.

‘Get down!’ Jason barrelled into her, knocking her off her feet with enough force that she received carpet burns on her hands when she hit the floor.

Benny felt rather than heard the sonic blast as it passed through the space her head had previously occupied. That meant it was either ultra- or subsonic in nature, but in the circumstances she really wasn’t in a position to care which.

What was important was that, here and now, in the strange physical spaces of the Station, it seemed to operate like a projectile weapon. It was as if some physical object had struck the window to crack it (unfortunately not shattering it, which might have done some small amount of good) and rebound to blow off the head of one of the pale porters, who was still quite calmly and conscientiously sorting through a pile of underwear from a steamer trunk.

Jason was rolling and pulling a small hand-blaster from his jacket. Her ex-husband, Bernice recalled, had always tended to use such weapons for their stopping power rather than show, and only ever as a last resort. If he was pulling his weapon now then they must all suddenly be sipping their pina coladas on a seriously terminal beach.

Jason fired. A high-powered beam seemingly out of all proportion to the size of the gun shrieked through the air to strike the figure squarely in the chest – and do absolutely nothing save dissipate with a crackle and the smell of ozone.

The figure brushed vaguely at its chest, as though at an unimportant stain on its non-existent tie. Then it began to turn again, still with that slow but unstoppable intent, to zero in on Benny.

Benny, for her part, had by now snatched up the holdall containing her small collection of personal items – she was trying at this point not to think of them as personal effects – and was pawing through it desperately. She knew that it basically contained little more than a change of clothing, but the nature of a holdall is that over months and years of use it tends to accumulate any number of odd bits and pieces in the corners and under the items one throws into it for any particular trip. It wasn’t quite that there might be something in there she could use in this predicament; it was just the only possible place where there might be something she could use.

Her hand brushed something solid and tubular. There appeared to be a trigger-button on it. Given the active life Benny led it could be anything from a long-forgotten fragmentation grenade to a can of deodorant. Oh well. It could hardly make things worse, whatever it was. She pulled it from the bag, depressed the button and hoped like hell the end result wouldn’t take off her arm at the shoulder, or have

her still being killed but smelling really fabulous in the process.

It was in fact, she belatedly realised, one of those personal alarms that purport to scare off an attacker by the simple expedient of squealing like someone being attacked. She realised this by way of the piercing shriek it now emitted, which seemed to be reacting with the globular acoustics of the room to produce some strange and eardrum-torturing harmonics.

The effect on the Whistling Ninja was nothing short of astounding. It clamped two massive hands to its head (or at least, the lumpen mass that was currently serving it as a head) and began to shake as if in agony.

Then, without any particular drama, it simply collapsed into its component parts. The tiny black-clad figures ran around in confusion for a second, clutching at their heads and chests, and fell over with their feet sticking up in the air, which Benny, privately, thought was a bit much.

Jason, she realised, was looking at her with a strange kind of admiration. He was genuinely, as opposed to grudgingly, impressed and doing his damndest not to show it.

‘How did you know that only a specific sound of a certain pitch can debilitate a Whistling Ninja?’ he said.

‘Well, ah...’ said Benny, winging it and hoping Jason might not actually notice. ‘It was obvious, really. The thing was using sound as a weapon, and people use weapons that they know can hurt. Simple deductive logic. Is it dead?’

Jason looked down at the fallen tiny figures. ‘No. It’ll be a while before it can reconstitute itself, though. That might give us time to pump some information out of it.’

Against one wall was a cabinet that seemed to be a cross between a refrigerator and an incubator (a simple matter of heat exchange, as anyone who has felt the heat being wasted out of the top of a refrigerator knows). It was the Station Control version of a mini bar, containing anything from soft and alcoholic drinks suitable for humans to benzine, liquid nitrogen, motor oil and what might or might not have been warm sulphuric acid. In accordance with yet another universal constant, it contained them in minuscule and hideously expensive amounts. Jason selected a pipette of cold water and dribbled the fluid on one of the unconscious little Ninjettes, which came awake with much spluttering and squeaking.

Jason pinched the scruff of its neck between his fingers and picked it up. ‘Who are you working for? I know you things work for anyone who pays you. Who sent you after us?’

The tiny figure kicked its legs and emitted a kind of trilling, like angry bird song. Then it folded its arms and let itself hang there,

regarding Jason with smug imperviousness.

‘Have you still got a blast left in that alarm thing?’ Jason asked Bernice. ‘I reckon that if we press it right to this thing’s head we can make it explode...’

The tiny figure looked at him for a moment, then sullenly made the same sort of gesture to which Benny had considered treating Jason earlier. Jason pondered this thoughtfully.

‘So it’s like that is it – don’t!’

This last was directed at Bernice, who seeing that some excess sound-pressure might be used after all had depressed the button on her alarm again. She hadn’t pressed it to the tiny figure’s head as Jason had threatened, but it squealed along with the sonic blast and then lapsed into unconsciousness again.

‘Marvellous,’ Jason said, glaring at the thing in his hand then around at the other comatose component parts.

‘They’re going to be out for hours now, and anything we do to wake ’em up will probably kill them. We won’t get any more out of them.’

‘It didn’t look as though we were getting anything out of them anyway,’ said Benny, slightly piqued at this ex-spousal attitude to her initiative.

‘We got that it was being paid by the Pontificating Dragon Clan,’ said Jason. ‘That was the sign it was making. We might have learnt something more useful if you hadn’t been so trigger-happy. I mean, we pretty much know that Mora di Vasht was kidnapped by the Dragon people, we just...’

Jason, belatedly, realised that the intraspousal atmosphere, which had quite a way to go before reaching room temperature in any case, had just dropped several more degrees.

‘Are you telling me,’ said Benny, ‘that you and your... you and your pals in the Sunshine Brigade have known who the kidnappers were all along?’

‘Well, broadly speaking, yes,’ said Jason. ‘I mean, the Family of the Iron Sun has enemies and rivals, and the Dragon people seem to be the most likely bet. There was a bit of a barney with them a month or so back. I wasn’t involved personally, but I gather there was a hell of a mess and one of the favourite husbands of their leader, woman called Mae An T’zhu, was killed.’

‘And it never occurred to you,’ Benny growled, ‘to so much as even mention this to me?’

Things between Bernice Summerfield, spinster of this particular interdimensional parish, and her ex-husband (soon to be eunuch of this parish if one Bernice Summerfield had anything to do with it) might have somewhat deteriorated from that curious sympathy between partners where one of them grunts and the other tells them

that they've left the pair of glasses for which they're looking in the bathroom, but you'd have had to have the general sensitivity of a hatstand not to catch the emotions in her voice. Jason held up his hands defensively.

'Listen,' he said. 'That's not important; the important thing is to find the girl, and they wouldn't be so stupid as to hide her on their own turf. That would lead to open war between two Clans, with every other Clan picking sides, and that's just what everyone's trying to avoid. Besides, if you knew, what could you possibly hope to do? Storm right off into somewhere heavily fortified and impregnable like the Dragon people's Enclave and give Mae An T'zhu a piece of your mind...?'

After hours of captivity, certain biological processes were making themselves felt in the person of Mora di Vasht. Quite insistently so. Fear of Suzi II and her new cohorts had thus far contrived to have Mora holding it in... but there comes a time in every life when a full bladder brooks for almost no other consideration. That time was coming fast, so under the pressure as it were of internal debate, she raised a timid hand and said, 'Please may I be excused?'

The action, words and tone of the request sparked a deep and basic anger in her. It was as though she had reverted to a small child, unsure as yet of her rightful position in life and asking one of her tutors for a favour.

'No,' said Suzi II, idly paring her nails with a dagger and not so much as deigning to glance in Mora's direction.

In the circumstances this tipped Mora's anger out of any consideration at all, even that of self-preservation. 'You let me go now!' she snapped – and saw her ex-bodyguard visibly and unconsciously flinch. The cybertronic controls might have been disabled, she thought, but years of subservience since childhood had taken their toll. That might be something she could use...

'Look,' she said more reasonably. 'I really do have to. I won't be answerable for the consequences if I don't.'

Suzi II considered this for a moment. 'All right.'

Keeping her arm in a firm grip, Suzi II took Mora from the room and into a dark tunnel from which openings of various width ran off. It seemed to be the self-enclosed equivalent of an alleyway, connecting to larger tunnels at either end through which the dim shapes of other living creatures moved.

The tunnel floor was befouled by various midden-heaps, and Suzi II took Mora to one of them. 'You can do it here.'

Mora found herself bristling again. 'I certainly will not!'

Again, the ex-bodyguard flinched before collecting herself again.

‘Suit yourself. This is your only chance.’

Your only chance.

Something clicked in Mora’s head. Don’t hang around one second longer, and forget about your reason for being out here because (a) things will get more complicated in a way involving underwear, and (b) if you wait until afterwards Suzi I will be doubly cautious, that being the moment, as it were, that people in stories commonly make a break for it. You have one chance, and if you’re going to do anything about it you have to do it now.

‘Take your hands off me!’ Mora shouted, filling her voice with every iota of her naturally spoilt and imperious manner.

‘Stay where you are and don’t move!’

In this, though she was unaware of it, Mora was fortunate in that Suzi II did indeed have some unconscious hangover from her lifetime as a slave. In addition, while the control cores of her cybertronics had been disabled, it was not quite as simple as that. They operated on the basis of a complicated network of imperatives and augmentive conditioning that were more than the sum of their parts, and simply yanking out their nexal centres did not eradicate them entirely. Suzi II could control her impulses of obedience, but only by conscious and determined effort – that being one of the reasons why she had insisted Mora not speak. The issuing of a Direct Order from the one she had been programmed to serve set up a conflict and put her at a momentary disadvantage.

All of which goes some was to explaining why Suzi II’s hands sprang back from Mora di Vasht as though they had been stung, and for a few precious moments she simply stood there trying to regain control from her subconscious, traitorous impulses – by which time Mora di Vasht was running at full pelt into the tunnels.

5 The Realm of Senses

In the heavily fortified and impregnable centre of the Clan of the Pontificating Dragon's Enclave, Mae An T'zhu reclined upon her day couch, absently inhaling the sweet smoke from the gold mouthpiece of a garnet-encrusted hookah and running idle fingers through the hair of the hunting stag, tamed and neutered, which lay dozing on the floor beside her. Her attention, though, was directed in its entirety to the reflecting pool which hung before her, its vertical liquid surface currently filled by the suavely smiling face of Volan Sled.

'My dear lady,' Sled was saying. 'As I believe I've said before, I cannot begin to express my continuing, and continual, mortification, as it were, regarding the unfortunate death of your paramour. Those responsible have been disciplined, and quite severely, too. You must understand, though, that the persons involved were not entirely at fault – they simply thought that, as they would have done, your friend would regenerate in some quiet corner and be up and around, perfect as precipitation, within days. They might be guilty of ignorance and negligence, certainly, but at base there was no active intent.'

'Be that as it may, Sled,' said Mae An T'zhu, with an air of one not letting another off the hook quite so lightly, 'by long custom of my people, the crime calls for vendetta, and vendetta calls for death.'

'Which is impossible,' said Sled, 'for my people, until what we might put in simple terms as their Appointed Time. I assure you, however, that those responsible will not be enjoying life while they wait for their Appointments.'

Mae An decided to let the matter rest, for the moment, though the loss of D'arak was still like a flint athame in her heart.

'We'll talk of this later,' she said, 'at the Conclave of Families. Perhaps a fitting solution for both our lores will suggest itself. Is there any other business between us?'

'None that I'm aware of,' said Volan Sled.

Mae An waved a hand (the hunting stag stirring a little in drowsy askance at the sudden lack of petting) and the image in the mirror rippled and dissolved, leaving a flat perpendicular pool of mercury. She regarded her own reflection for a moment without really seeing it, lost momentarily in recollections of D'arak, who had been so infuriatingly headstrong and unreliable, but who had filled something deep inside her, touched her in ways no other man could, and whose loss had left a kind of gaping hole which any number of possible replacements had yet to...

As if in response to any number of readers with one-track minds and who should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves, the mirror surface

swirled and then cohered into a new image: the face of one of the guardsmen who were posted at the entrances to the Enclave for their strapping and impressive bulk as opposed to the swift lethality of the sidhe who invisibly patrolled the interior.

‘We have some intruders, lady,’ he said.

‘In the sense of sneaking around outside?’ Mae An said, on the basis that had these putative intruders been sneaking around *inside* they’d have been more or less instantly dispatched by the aforementioned sidhe.

The guardsman frowned. ‘More in the sense of hammering on the door and shouting “let us in, you bleeders, we know you’re in there” at the top of their voices.’

‘I see. Let me have a look at them.’

The guardsman turned what was obviously a hand-held looking glass from his face to show another two guardsmen in their bronze and oiled-silk finery, each of them restraining a rather less well-turned-out figure in a vicelike grip. This restraint seemed more to stop this latter pair from physically attacking each other as they squabbled quite violently. It was hard to tell, but the larger, male member of the two seemed to be opining that the smaller female could go and stick something, the nature of which appeared to be quite abstract, up her funny arm.

‘What shall we do with them?’ the guardsman asked, his face returning to the field of vision. ‘Throw them out?’

‘Hmm...’ said Mae An T’zhu, thoughtfully.

As will become clear at some slightly later point, Mae An T’zhu was not entirely human in the commonly accepted meaning of the term, and it would be a mistake to think of her impulses and motivations in entirely human terms. It was not that she did not have morals or ethics – indeed, her ethical system was in fact far stronger than that of most humans who claim to have morals – but that they were not, in the end, concerned with things that were quite frankly none of their business.

Since the time of the legendary Lord Oberon and Lady Titania – legendary in the sense that in this particular reality they had about the same existence as Gilgamesh or King Arthur as opposed to, say, a hippogriff – her people had felt what might be called a playful affinity with a specific breed of human beings, from a multiverse into which these days it was almost impossible to get. Much sport was oft made of them, so the stories went, though the precise disposition of the balls and scoring was hard to tell with accuracy.

So when Mae An T’zhu saw by certain signs that the two intruders were quite possibly of that breed of human, she had them brought to her out of idle interest in whatever amusement they might have to

offer. It wasn't that she fancied the chance of chatting up a couple of likely-looking bits of rough at all.

'I am never,' said Jason with finality, 'ever going to listen to you again. Just go and talk to them, you said. Use my status in the Iron Sun to keep things diplomatic and friendly and just sniff around a bit, you said. What the hell did you think you were doing banging and hollering away like that?'

'I can't think what got into me,' said Bernice.

Actually, she could. They had left the Starsail Lodge, leaving the scattered remains of the Whistling Ninja where they were, which had surprised Benny a little. Surely, she had said, the moment it regained consciousness, wouldn't it be swiftly recompiling itself and coming after them again?

That wasn't how it worked, Jason had told her. The life forms known as the Whistling Ninja (the name, of course, derived from the sonic nature of its method of assassination) tended to be hired for a specific job whether the end of that endeavour was achieved or not. It was like firing a projectile weapon – you don't go around collecting up the bullets that missed to fire again. If the Dragon people had hired the Whistling Ninja to come after them, Jason had said, they'd have to hire it/them all over again or think of something else.

It wasn't worth worrying about.

They had travelled to the Dragon people's Enclave on what had appeared to be a linked train of steam-driven, elongated brass camels, each with fifteen humps with comfortably padded seats instead of saddles between. Benny, all the while, had been congratulating herself on how she had finally managed to put her reactions to the Station behind her, how all this strangeness now seemed no more remarkable than a trip to the recently-opened Starbucks back on the Braxiatel Collection. There were any number of visiting academics back there, from planets and species she had never in some cases so much as heard of, after all. She had been acting a bit erratically for a while, of course, but that was completely natural and only to be expected; now she was finally on top of things...

Of course, as people who are continually telling themselves things know, that hadn't been the case at all.

What she'd contrived to do was build a thin little bubble of sanity, rather like a diving bell, in which she could sit while sinking into the depths of madness. The pressure, however, had been building up for hours, and it could only be a matter of time before the bubble burst. Sitting on the mechanical camel, congratulating herself constantly about how well she was dealing with things, it had been the sight of the Dragon people's Enclave that had, as it were, been the final straw.

It was a Fairy Tale castle.

Well, no it wasn't, in the same way that the Starsail Lodge hadn't been a schooner. The forms and planes of it, though, the sense of turrets and portcullises and chapel archways had merely given it the impression that the sort of drawbridged establishment with knights on chargers forever shuttling in and out had been broken down into its component parts and then banged together in an archetypical lump. It had been, however, enough for Benny.

Jack Kerouac, via William S. Burroughs, called it a Naked Lunch moment; that instant where you wake up, look around and really see what's on the end of every fork. On looking at the Enclave, hours of pent-up confusion and fear of the unknown had burst forth and something inside her had snapped and said: that's it. I've had it. I've had enough.

The initial explosion of sheer rage had by now subsided – which might or might not have been to do with the fact that, once again in as many days, she was in the custody of guards twice as strong as she would be after several years of healthy living, regular exercise and a daily dose of anabolic steroids. It is slightly difficult to throw a violent fit when big, strapping lads are on hand to lock your limbs in a firm but vicelike grip so they can't move so much as a micron.

As the guardsmen marched her and Jason through a tortuous maze of flagstone halls lit by electrical lights contrived to simulate torchlight, she regarded them thoughtfully. Big and strapping they might be, but there was something rather elegant about their proportions. Not effeminate, precisely, but with an innate kind of willowy grace as though their humaniform bodies had evolved from something more swift and fleet than apes, like cats or – and this was closer – some kind of predatory deer or hart, if such a thing could be imagined.

Their skin seemed slightly translucent; not so that subdermal matter could be seen through it, but in that some pale and inner glow, like moonlight, shone through. The slanted eyes and somewhat pointed ears reminded Benny uneasily of something, but she couldn't quite pin it down

'What kind of people are they?' she asked Jason quietly, out of the corner of her mouth in the way that people do when they imagine speaking from the corner of your mouth won't be heard by all and sundry.

'Elven.' Jason shrugged and nodded towards the guardsman escorting him. 'Mind you, these guys aren't exactly typical of the Faerie races. In human terms these lads'd be giants. Make impressive doormen, though.'

'Faerie?' Benny said as the recollected shock of first seeing the

Enclave fell into place. On the edge of hearing she thought she heard a multiple giggling, like the tinkling of tiny bells, but there was nothing to be seen. 'Are you telling me these people really come from fairyland? Anyway, I thought elves had names like Shambalamana or something.'

'Yeah, and everyone from Pakistan is called Patel,' said Jason. 'And it's really only Faerie in the sense of that not being right at all. It's like the way the Infernal Regions got confused with Hell. People from our world found themselves in the Unseen Lands, came back with stories of pixies and elves and polygynous dwarves and such, and got it all completely wrong. They imposed their own interpretations and sort of fixed them without understanding that places evolve and develop. The Unseen Lands have about as much relation to the sort of thing you're talking about as a fluffy toy tiger has to the real thing.'

Strangely enough, the mention of real tigers did not reassure Benny overmuch.

'Look,' she said. 'Just to save me any more nasty surprises, are there any other worlds out there I should know about? What about Horror World, full of graveyards, haunted castles and Frankenstein monsters lurching about?'

Jason snorted. 'That would be stupid. Frankenstein was a fictional character invented by Mary Shelley. You only find him and his monster in the multiverse which picks up archetypal resonances from all the others. There's a world of lycanthropes, I suppose, which people get mixed up with stories of werewolves, vampires and zombies...'

'Oh my,' said Bernice. 'Worlds still ruled by the dinosaurs?'

Jason shrugged. 'One or two.'

'Worlds where the gods really exist?'

'Something like that. And you wouldn't want to take their names in vain, believe me. They have a nasty habit of turning up.'

'Santa and his band of little elves up at the North Pole?'

'Um, you do remember where were are, right?' Jason said, looking around at their escort uneasily. 'These people are the elven. It might be an idea to can it with the mentions of the little silver hammers, which a more applicable to the dwarfish in any case.' He shrugged. 'Besides, from what I've heard, the only actual creature that ever evolved to resemble Santa Claus was a really nasty predator called the Snata – over in a multiverse that looked like a massive orrery or something – and it became extinct when that multiverse collapsed on itself.'

'Now you're pulling my leg,' said Bernice. 'An entire multiverse built like an orrery? That's just stupid.'

'Suit yourself.' Jason shrugged yet again. 'I must admit, I'm not sure

if the equivalent of planets were the birds themselves or being carried by them.'

Benny was about to enlighten her ex-husband as to the difference between the word 'orrrery' and 'aviary' when she realised that they were approaching a large and ornate set of arched doors, which were swinging open of their own accord. Through them, a chamber hung with tapestries depicting a number of young people at rather boisterous play, the majority of them entirely innocuous but one or two of a nature that one felt one would have to turn the room on its side to work out what was going on. Musk-scented candles flickered in abstract stands, the lines and forms of which contrived to suggest a sensual and more fleshly presence barely in absentia, as though it had just nipped down to the shops for a moment and would be back soon to stick its tongue in your ear.

Sumptuous rugs and throw-pillows were strewn across the floor, together with a number of what at first looked like wolfhounds until you realised that each of them bore a set of horns like a stag. In the centre was a large chaise longue, on which lay the most beautiful woman Bernice had ever seen.

'How perfectly lovely to see you,' the woman said, raising a perfect eyebrow in a manner that seemed friendly enough, but very cool and collected. It's your job to impress me, the look said, without ever being so ill-bred as to insist upon the matter, so you'd better start doing it. 'And you are...?'

'Greetings, Lady An T'zhu,' said Jason, bowing low in what was, Benny privately considered, an entirely overplayed manner. 'As a man of standing in the Family of the Iron Sun, I crave your indulgence in the offering of succour and cordial, um, intercourse in a manner such as befits the great and friendly regard between our two great Families. And as such may I be the first to proffer my own respects, in a manner befitting my own poor species, by saying that I personally would not be adverse to the idea of giving you one on the spot.'

There are times when one gets not so much as a sinking feeling as a positive and debilitating plunge. It wasn't that Bernice couldn't believe her ears, it was that she could believe them all too very well. Over the years she had spent with Jason, she had learnt to her cost that his favourite method of discourse operated by way of an anti-Platonic Trinity of (a) opening the mouth, (b) forcibly inserting a foot and (c) closing the mouth again. What she genuinely couldn't believe, Bernice thought, was that she had ever been so stupid as to trust him not to start coming on to the beautiful leader of a villainous gang of kidnappers, who would even now be calling in the guards to have her and Jason taken away, as is completely usual in these circumstances.

The Lady An T'zhu, however, merely nodded as though paid a

formal and entirely proper compliment.

‘I’ve this moment talked with your Mr Sleed,’ she said, ‘about unfortunate matters that need not concern us at this time. At least, I trust they have no, uh, direct connection with yourself? I should hate to know that such a fine figure as yourself might be besmirched by such a stain.’

‘Had there been,’ said Jason, ‘I should have immolated myself the instant it became apparent rather than continue an existence for which you could have nothing but contempt. Steps, at the very least, would have had to be taken not to keep a lady in distress for a moment longer than was necessary – especially one with such marvellous thruppenny bits.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ asked the Lady An T’zhu, seemingly out of pure interest rather than anything else.

‘A colloquialism of my people,’ said Jason, making what, here and now, was an appropriate gesture.

The Lady An T’zhu dimpled. ‘And such a lyrical way your people must have about them. Please, then, sir, pay the matter no mind.’

Bernice was no stranger to the diplomatic manner. That is, over the years she had been exposed to it and it had gone around her, without her ever quite managing to gain the knack. She had worked out that the innuendo and personal remarks were as much a formality as Black Rod banging on the doors of Parliament, though the reasons for them becoming a formality probably told you something about the general nature of the Dragon Clan and/or the Elven as a people.

She was also aware that certain subjects had been skirted quite skilfully, asked and answered while making no overt mention of the fact that at least two of the people in this room were quite lucky indeed to still have their lives.

Now the Lady An T’zhu climbed from her couch and walked towards them with a cheerful little wiggle that for a moment made Benny herself feel a little flustered. Everyone has at some point been in the company of an individual who is flat-out sexy, as opposed to the darker and more complex reactions engendered by being sexual, and the Lady Mae An T’zhu had that quality in spades – operating on a high-powered, widecast bandwidth that no human could ever produce. You’d have had to be a small, grey piece of gravel to remain unaffected by it, and even then you’d probably have the odd thought about being walked on with high heels. It might have been, Benny thought, the basis for the mythical Glamour that the faerie were supposed to cast over mortals. Then again, it was probably just pheromones rather than any kind of supernatural force.

‘You’re quite a big boy, aren’t you,’ the Lady An T’zhu said, playfully fingering Jason’s arm in a way that for some reason made

Benny fume in a strangely pleasurable way, like watching a cartoon animal shadow-boxing whilst growling about how it'll take on the entire world. 'You can come up and see me any time.'

'That might be nice,' said Jason, with what he probably thought was a charming smile. 'Especially if you...'

'Ahem,' said Benny pointedly. It was one thing for time to have eroded some of the feelings between herself and her ex-husband. It was quite another for him to be making up with some floozy right in front of her. 'Don't forget we have some business to attend to here.'

'Ah. Business before pleasure, yes?' The Lady An T'zhu turned to Bernice and gave her a wink and a smile. 'You're a forceful little thing, aren't you? I quite like that.'

Definitely a supernatural force, then, Benny thought.

There was no way otherwise that she could ever fancy anyone who had just called her a 'forceful little thing'.

'To business, then,' she said, deciding in her pique to forgo the diplomatic niceties and resort to frankness. 'A visitor to this station, a girl under the protection of chummy here's Family, has been kidnapped by your people, apparently, and they believe that I'm involved. Now, at this point I honestly don't care what the reasons were. I just think you're all as bad as each other and I refuse to be involved. I simply want it to be made known that it has nothing whatsoever to do with me, so I can -'.

For an instant Bernice thought she had been physically slapped. She raised a hand to her face in puzzled hurt before she realised that there was no physical pain. The shock had come from the change of expression on the Lady An T'zhu's face to one of sheer fury; the change in the emotionally affecting power she broadcast, from that of attraction to complete and utter repulsion.

'You dare...' the Lady An T'zhu snarled, in that soft way that has any reasonable listener turning tails and heading for any available hills and is far more threatening than mere shouting. 'You dare to accuse me and mine of... of this infamy? Who has been saying this? Who has been spreading these lies?'

Volan Sled looked at those gathered before his desk with barely-concealed disgust. If you knew him, and had known him long, you would know that this was the equivalent of what in another man might be a towering and murderous rage.

'One simple thing,' he said. 'I ask you to do one simple thing. Keep the girl incommunicado, keep her out of the way and keep her out of sight - did I perchance not make myself clear? Did I say "let her go running off at the first available opportunity?" I think not.'

'It was my fault,' said Suzi II. 'I was off my guard. I went after her,

but the territory was unfamiliar and I...'

She realised that she was attempting to justify herself. For all the fact that she was not under cybertronic control, the world she had known all her life was quite limited in a number of respects, and in the end it held one penalty for failure. 'It was my fault,' she said again. 'I should die.'

'My dear young lady,' Slead said with a reassuring and rather paternal smile, 'I quite understand. It was my fault for putting you in a position for which you were not quite ready. You are still learning to be fully human after being brought up in, if I may say so, quite distressing circumstances. You're still a child – and what sort of man would I be if I was forever killing children for the mistakes children make? I'd be forever running out of them, for one thing, and I'm certainly not a man to waste potentially valuable resources needlessly – and such a valuable resource I'm sure, in time, you shall become. I have no doubt on that score, believe you me.'

Suzi II regarded him a little warily. Streamlined and limited though her impulses might be in one sense, she was clever enough to wonder just how many levels Slead's urbane little speech was operating on. It could be taken at face value, or as mockery, or as an outright threat.

Slead's face now clouded as he turned his attention to the other two occupants of the chamber.

'Mr Whorl and Mr Sloater, on the other hand...' he said, the coldness of his voice leaving no doubt whatsoever that he was being very serious indeed. 'Knowing that the young lady here was new to the Station, knowing that she was still finding her feet, you let her remove the girl from out of your supervision? And then, when the girl, as I say, takes the first available opportunity to escape, what do you do? You run around in circles failing utterly to find so much as a trace of her. That – and correct me if I'm wrong – is precisely what you do.'

'Yes, ah, well,' hissed the reanimated mouth of Mr Sloater.

'This was in the Underland, you see. Things stay the same down there...'

He said it in much the same way that a man used to a stable multiverse might have referred to the mutable nature of the Station proper – the need to remember where things were was more confusing than merely knowing where they were as they shifted themselves around.

'We set a Seeker on her,' Whorl cut in with the air of one saving his colleague's embarrassment, 'but it got sorta confused... it couldn't get its mind around how someone could only have one body and how the essence was just a sort of electric network in its head...'

'There are times,' said Volan Slead, 'when I think I'd be better off getting rid of all my henchmen and starting again with a cadre of

Newly Fallen.’ He glowered at the two hapless minions. ‘You have truly disappointed me.’

Sleed raised his hands in a manner reminiscent of a conjuror. There was a shrieking, tearing sound as the very air itself split asunder, though that was nothing to the shrieking that came from the pair of minorly demonic mouths – or rather, from one demonically-controlled mouth and one invisible thing that might or might not have been a mouth obscured by bandages. Those bandages now fell to the plushly carpeted floor as whatever had been supporting them imploded with a bang. The corpse that had been controlled by Sloater, its torso now completely empty, pitched forward to hit the floor with a thump and lay immobile.

Suzi II looked at the remains of the effectively disincorporated minions as though not quite believing her eyes. There was a sound behind her. She spun round, fight-impulses taking over, to see that it was merely Sleed’s private elevator opening. She turned back slowly to see Sleed’s once again friendly and reassuring smile.

‘I apologise,’ he said, ‘for making you witness that. Still, it might serve as something of an object lesson. I might, as I say, allow the mistakes of children, but there really are limits, and at some point children really do have to grow up.’ He gestured expansively, giving the impression that he was taking in the world of the Station at large rather than the confines of his sanctum. ‘Your mistress – I mean, pardon me, your ex-mistress – is still out there, and who knows what trouble she might be getting into? I trust, if you wish to continue to rely upon my patronage, you’ll find her quite soon.’

Sleed waved a hand in idle dismissal. The discussion was over, and Suzi II got the impression that she’d barely got away from it with her life – and only a temporary stay on the ending of that life at that. Her streamlined mental processes might equate failure directly with death, but she was not so much of a fool as to like the idea of it: she was relieved. She headed for the elevator, wondering how in the various hells she was going to pick up the trail of the Lady di Vasht...

Behind her, almost as an afterthought, Volan Sleed extended a finger. The floor of the elevator cage opened up and Suzi II dropped through it with a fading cry.

Sleed regarded the open doors of the elevator over steepled fingers for a moment, then caused them to close.

He pulled a large fob watch from his suit and considered it for a moment, then glanced at the remains of the two minions. Quietly, without a fuss, they reanimated themselves.

‘I trust the lesson was salubrious?’ he asked them as they looked around dazedly. The... place to which he had consigned them operated on a slightly different timescale so that a fraction of a second

could last several million years, none of them spent, not to put too fine a point upon it, comfortably.

‘Rak, agh khaghagh,’ said Sloater, trying to regain the knack of controlling a corpse after quite some time away.

‘I...’ Whorl cast around himself. ‘I... seem to remember a... I’m sure I do... I seem to remember a...’

‘The young lady shall not be joining us after all,’ Slead said blandly. ‘I decided that she was not quite cut out for life in the big Station. If she turned traitor once, she’d turn it again – and I should hate to have her in a position where she could betray me.’ He smiled, to himself. ‘Never mind. I’m sure we’ll find a use for her somewhere.’

Mora di Vasht, meanwhile, was learning something about the situation of those for whom there was use at all. The Underland was the domain of what might charitably be called the bungled and the botched; a place where those who could, still clung to life untenable elsewhere. A place of leavings and of ending up.

The adrenalin-rush of escape had long since passed, and after some while of wandering through the slimy tunnels and chambers, the only light from diseased-looking phosphorescence on the walls and the ignition of vented sewer gas, Mora had actually tried to find her way back to the place from which she had escaped. Even with an angry ex-bodyguard waiting to take things out on her, it seemed preferable to being alone like this.

Or not alone, precisely. Frubjurous shapes in sheets globbered and meeped through the darkness, some lighting their way with lambent orbs on extensible stalks like lantern-fish, others hauling their way through the dirt with hands bigger than the rest of their bodies, some with poles, or lopped off stalks, or tricycle wheels where their legs should have been. In the beginning, in some multiversal worlds, was the Word and the Word was made flesh... but if that was the case down here in the Underland then the Words were complete and utter gibberish. Mora now crept through the tunnels very, very cautiously, starting at every sight, sound and smell.

Strangely enough, though she could feel the purely physical sensations as she startled at every new fright, she couldn’t really feel it in herself. It was as if she herself was some detached observer, sitting in the cool and cushioned safety of her head and watching as the remote-controlled mechanism of her body acted and reacted. In fact, though she didn’t know it, she had passed from simple fear or terror to the point where she was quite literally, clinically insane.

Her upbringing and basic temperament meant that the worst she could conceive of as happening to her was not to get everything she wanted when she wanted it – and to find herself in the horror of the

Underland had blown the fuses of her mind.

It was the difference between being able to get angry about having to sleep in an unmade bed, and being suddenly plunged headfirst into a septic tank. It was so out of the bounds of what was possible, in her mind, that the mind of Mora di Vasht was simply unable to cope. If some impartial observer had been there, watching her stumbling, whimpering progress through the tunnels, that observer would have been hard pushed to tell the difference between her and the occasional wretched, misshapen creatures through which she passed.

Lost in her internal world and numbed to her surroundings, she completely failed to notice a series of sign boards planted in the muck, their faces daubed with a luminescent pigment to proclaim such warnings as:

KEeP BACK!
and:
TUrN BACK NOW!
and:
THIS MeANS YOU!
and:
ReALLY (!!!)
and:
SCRAM!!!!*

* -Scram' is (most likely) a Registered Trademark ® VermKnid Enterprises and is (not) used under licence. All rights reserved. And all that stuff.

...until at last she came to a sign that broke through by way of its restraint, like a moment of silence in the clashing discord of an avant garde fugue:

DoN't say wE diDn't Warn YoU!

The tunnels had opened out into a cavern-chamber every bit as big as those of the Station itself – but in the same way one knew the tunnels to be tunnels, as opposed to merely passageways and conduits, the chamber spoke to parts of you hardly knew you had, and told them that wherever else you might be, in any other sense, in the most important sense you were deep, deep underground. You were buried alive.

One of the things that annoys the inhabitants of what are called the Infernal Regions is the assumption that their multiverse looks like a molten lava bed as drawn by Ernst.

The fact that their multiverse consists of bubbles in endless rock,

they point out, misses the point. The point being the sheer size of said bubbles. The bubble-worlds themselves are quite big enough that the nature of them is no more evident than the planetary nature of a picture-book English landscape. The bubble-worlds had land and sky just like everyone else, produced any number of different terrains from jungle to desert to mountain ranges – and none of them, as such, looked like Hades after an extra delivery of charcoal.

This chamber in the Underland, however, looked just as people who had never actually been to the Infernal Regions assumed them to be. The sewer-gas flares that had thus far lit Mora's way became roaring pressure vents, between which rose shanty-town dwellings built from garbage. At first sight it might have been reminiscent of the chaos of Station Control itself – but only at first sight. For all its seeming complexity, the Station and all its disparate components operated under a kind of underlying logic, a control that allowed it to function in the same way that a dance floor by and large does not descend into a riot. Here that was completely absent, as though the Underland were a kind of anti-Station and operating under the precise opposite of Control.

Rotting, unidentifiable matter hung from gibbets. Various items that were entirely too identifiable in the sewer-gas light were strung between the mounds. The crowd of malformed inhabitants moved about their silent business with a sense of animal purpose. There were a lot of them, and, rather than the aimless, skulking wanderings of the individuals Mora had encountered before, they moved like a pack – a single entity composed of a thousand mindless units. And as Mora stood there, every single one of them turned in her direction. The mess of them drifted towards her with the kind of slow deliberation common to scavengers. It would only be a matter of time before the group-dynamic mind fully realised that this potential prey was indeed alone and outnumbered, and then as one they would surge forward to fall upon her...

'Get down,' a female voice said behind her, and something bright flew over her head. Several more followed, and for a moment Mora thought they were explosive grenades, such as she had seen her father's troops use on the practice ranges (and on moving targets, drawn from those cybertronic servants who were too old and worn-out to be of any further use).

They were in fact, she quickly saw, merely flares which burnt with a bright, gemlike light completely at odds with the other sick-looking combustion nearby. The Underland denizens backed off from them, still making no sound, like gaseous petroleum displaced by a splash of clean water.

'Now this is usually the point,' said the voice behind her,

‘that I say how things have been a bit of an anticlimax. Only I don’t think I will, because for some unaccountable reason I’m feeling a little contrary.’

Mora turned to face the speaker and saw a collection of well-muscled men in leather and rough-woven silk, glancing about themselves warily and holding complicated-looking staves at the ready. Mora assumed the staves to be some kind of power-weapon, on the basis that the ornately-moulded ends of them were crackling with galvanistic fire.

There was something wrong about the men’s eyes and ears (Mora had a quite limited concept of what might be called properly human and thought of any deviance from that base as a wrongness) but for the moment, in comparison to their surroundings, they seemed the most beautiful sight Mora di Vasht had ever seen.

With them was a rather rough-looking woman whom Mora was vaguely aware of having once seen at some point, though she could not quite remember where and when it had been. Being the only female readily available, it was obvious that it was she who had spoken.

‘I’m Professor Summerfield,’ she said, speaking again, with a smile that could be taken as friendly or malicious depending entirely on how you wanted to take it. ‘You can call me “Professor”. Let’s get you out of here. We have a lot to talk about.’

* * *

After Mae An T’zhu’s outburst, Benny had been amazed at how the leader of the Dragon people (her mind kept wanting to call her a Faerie Queen and quite properly shied away from it in disgust) had taken charge of things. By way of her (again, Benny had tried not to think the words, but this time failed) magic mirror she had contacted any number of minions and set them to searching for Mora di Vasht, catching and following up on any rumour at all, and generally leaving no igneous aerolite on its previous lateral plane.

It had been a matter of minutes before a small face that might or might not have been a sprite appeared in the mirror and reported that two mysterious figures had been seen taking a Mora-sized bundle into the Underland. Mae had then dispatched what she called the sidhe – a swarm of invisible, intangible creatures whose only evidence of being there in the first place was that you somehow simply knew that they were – to comb what was apparently the most tenebrously dangerous place in the station for signs of her.

Now, travelling back through the brighter and in some strange sense more understandable confusion of the Station proper, Benny found herself almost sagging with relief. Dark and creepy her trip through

the Underland may have been, even with the assistance of the elven guards Mae had dispatched to go with her, but she hadn't met with any direct threat. This had not exactly been a comfort; she'd had the distinct impression that the dangers down there were of a sort that didn't bother to threaten first. If something had decided to attack, she'd have simply been dead before she'd had time to notice.

Mora di Vasht had been a wretched and subdued figure in comparison to the imperious creature Benny had seen earlier, and this had remained more or less the case on the trip back to the Enclave.

However, once in the relatively splendid surroundings of the Enclave, Mora di Vasht now seemed to be more herself.

'I demand to be taken to the person in charge of this place immediately,' she said sharply, and somewhat superfluously given that they were already heading for the chambers of Mae An T'zhu. 'I have never been treated so in my life!'

Comments on the lines of 'well you ought to get out a bit more' formed in Benny's head, but in the end she decided it was too much bother. She'd been up for more hours than she could guess and in none of them had she eaten. She was quite frankly getting tired of the whole thing.

'Let's just see what you get, yes?' she said.

As they finally entered Mae's chambers, the first thing she saw was Jason lying on a couch and being fed with some small kind of fruit by the Dragon Clan leader. Jason had been left in the enclave as tacitly-agreed hostage collateral to ensure that Benny was playing on the level. Looking at the pair of them, Benny wondered darkly how he had been holding his end up. It is one thing, after all, not to trust someone farther than one could throw them, and not really care about them either way – it's quite another not to trust or care about them while a vampy elven lady wearing barely more than a couple of silky postage stamps is smooching around them and shoving bits of fruit into their face.

'Happy?' she asked, managing to insert quite a bit of meaningful point into her tone.

'As I'll ever be,' said Jason with the sort of smile that simply cries out to be wiped off with an axe. 'I take it things went well?'

'As they ever do,' said Benny.

Mae An T'zhu, meanwhile, had gravitated to Mora di Vasht and was examining her with arch criticality. 'You poor dear,' she said. 'It must have been terrible for you.'

'Yes, uh...' Mora di Vasht seemed a little nonplussed by Mae's rather forward demeanour. 'It was...'

'I mean, look at the state of your clothes. And your hair. And your complexion. Your experiences must have ravaged you terribly to leave

you looking in a state like that.'

'Well, yes, but...'

'Stressful circumstances do tend to bring the the skin or your people out in spots, I seem to recall, and you must have been under huge amounts of stress. Why, they're almost boils, my dear. I think you might –'

'Look, this is all very congenial and entertaining,' Benny said, 'but it's not exactly getting us anywhere is it? I think it's time you told us your story, Miss di Vasht, and then we might have a chance of working out just what the hell is really going on.'

6 The Abode of Rats

Volan Slead regarded the viewing screen of the brastifranivisor, the name of which gave some clue as to the process by which it operated in much the same way as the word 'televisor'. Unfortunately, those processes were and are utterly beyond the human mind, with the possible exception of that of Dr Rupert Gilhooly, so those wishing to learn what

'brastifranic' actually means are going to be sorely disappointed.

Basically, contact between the disparate elements of Station Control were relatively simple; the state of flux in which the Station existed made communication easy, so that a hand-held walkie-talkie, a magic mirror or a tin can on the end of a length of string worked more often than not. The difficulty lay in communicating with a multiverse different from one's original own. Differing entropy-slopes, causal processes and the fact that something as basic as atoms might or might not exist, in a certain sense, made problems with incompatible phone sockets and the like the least of anyone's worries. Visually, the brastifranivisor looked like a cross between a miniature steam engine and a valve-radio, although that would also have to factor in a strangely organic quality, as though the things had aspects of some quite repulsive-looking living matter that existed in dimensions other than the purely visible.

On the screen (which consisted of a luminous membrane stretched over a hoop) the face of Lucien di Vasht glowered coldly.

Now, those who have been paying attention will remember that Lucien di Vasht is a warlord, and will no doubt be thinking along the lines of blood-and-grease-matted dreadlocks, a big sprouty beard with a weirdly straggly and elongated moustache, leather vest with fetching armoured shoulder-pad accessories and a propensity for quaffing fermented horse milk out of skulls flying into murderous rages and laying into all and sundry with a club looking like an enlarged baseball bat with spikes.

Small furry hats might or might not be involved in some capacity.

Those who have been paying slightly more attention will realise that this is in fact about as likely as expecting the pilot of an intergalactic cruiser to wear a leather flying helmet and goggles. Lucien di Vasht was a businessman of a certain kind – a viper-faced man in a sharp suit that left no doubt that the sort of business involved included the occasional need for large men with blowtorches, and not necessarily to open strongboxes.

He was not exactly happy – and rather like Volan Slead, if you could actually see that he was not happy, then he was probably very

unhappy indeed.

‘You will retrieve my daughter,’ he said. It was not an order, demand or request; it was a simple statement of how the world was going to be. A world where this was not so would not exist – at least, in terms of people being around to see it. ‘You’ll make an example of this Clan of the Pontificating Dragon.’

‘I will,’ said Volan Sled with an equally serious simplicity.

‘With your help I will. I gather the term you use in such matters is “extreme prejudice”...?’

‘Oh, I won’t be prejudiced,’ said Lucien di Vasht. ‘I want everybody included. All of them, you understand?’

Volan Sled nodded, and di Vasht cut the connection instantly. There were reasons far more practical for this than mere dismissive terseness: the resources involved in opening an interstitial link were quite horrendous, in any number of senses, some of which it might be on the whole best not to think about. The evolvment of necrology out of necromancy might have given things a slightly more technical gloss, but that didn’t change the basic process on which it operated or the nature of the power sources. Time on the ‘Dead Monkey 5000’ brand brastifranivisor was money, or at least monkeys.

The Dead Monkey 5000 had been supplied to Sled by di Vasht, whose people had long since developed the methods of multiversal communications and transport. Such necrology was jealously guarded; it had taken years of delicate negotiations to allow Sled himself even a limited access to it. Years of work, Sled thought sourly, that had been greatly inconvenienced by long periods spent as an outcast from his position as head of the Iron Sun Family and having to claw his way back. There had been several of those periods, he recollected, scratching at his shoulder in a largely unconscious response to a slight itch – and they always seemed to come at the most inconvenient times, the times when his plans had just reached the point of fruition.

Nevertheless, Sled considered, this time all the bases had been covered. (That might seem a slightly prosaic metaphor, given the demonic origins of Volan Sled, but the Infernal Regions did indeed enjoy a game reminiscent of baseball.

Only not played with balls. As such. There’s probably an old EC comic which captures the general flavour of it.) The rumours had been started, false trails set and evidence planted to tie the kidnapping of di Vasht’s daughter to the Clan of the Pontificating Dragon. Admittedly, said daughter was still at large in the Underland, but Volan Sled was of the opinion that ‘at large’ now meant ‘spread over a wide area’ and probably within the digestive systems of the various Underland denizens.

In any case, when Sled had told di Vasht that he had all of his

available men out looking for her, he had spoken the literal truth. The distinction was, however, that they were looking out to ensure that she did *not* turn up in a certain and specific place...

There was a chime from his intercom. 'Summerfield is here,' said the voice of the guard on the other end.

'Ah, yes,' said Sled. 'Our redoubtable investigator. Send her up by all means.'

* * *

Bernice stepped out of the elevator to find Volan Sled greeting her expansively, and with what she could only classify in her present state of mind as an insufferably smug grin.

'I take it that your investigations have borne fruit?' he said.

Bernice had the vaguely remembered idea that he liked to use a lot of fructal constructions like that. It didn't mean anything, but it put her in mind of apples recommended by serpents in the Garden of Eden.

'You could say that,' she said. 'We went to the Starsail Lodge, just on the off chance that it might be of any use – and the next thing we knew, we were being attacked by something called a Whistling Ninja.'

Sled frowned concernedly. 'I trust you weren't, uh, inconvenienced...'

'Hardly at all,' said Benny. 'I fortunately had precisely the right item with which to dispatch it. Them. Whatever.' She became thoughtful. 'Do you know, that didn't strike me as odd at the time. I mean, it wasn't as if that item had suddenly appeared in my bag or anything like that. Then again, though, if someone had already known it was there, having already searched me quite thoroughly, they might conceivably have some reason for sending a thing that could be disabled in just such a manner.'

'Anyway, after a certain amount of pressure, the Whistling Ninja led us straight to the Clan of the Pontificating Dragon. Now, the sensible thing, I suppose, would have been to report back to you, confirming what I gather was already a firm suspicion. No sensible person, after all, would blithely head off into certain capture and death out of some overactive sense of self-righteousness...'

'We have never,' Mae An T'zhu said angrily, 'employed the services of the Whistling Ninja and their ilk.'

This was back when Bernice and Jason had first arrived at the Enclave of the Dragon people to present their accusations. Mae's outburst at this had gone on for several minutes, much of that time spent proclaiming in extremely hyperbolic detail what she would have done to anyone caught spreading such lies. Considering the source,

this might have given a person of a certain sort and proclivities pause for thought.

‘We will fight, oh yes we will fight...’ she had continued, after calming down enough to refrain from dark pronouncements concerning chains, blades, various utensils and a punnet of spinefruit ‘...but we will fight with honour, and such creatures have none. They will do anything their paymaster wishes, say anything he tells them to...’

‘So the evidence of the Whistling Ninja was tainted at best,’ said Bernice, ‘and quite frankly, I found it not a little odd that the prime suspects in this so-called heinous crime didn’t even so much as know about it. And when the Dragon people started investigating matters themselves, do you know what they found?’

‘I have no idea,’ said Volan Sleed, ‘though I presume you are about to enlighten me.’

‘They found nothing. I mean, they found Mora di Vasht almost ridiculously easily. What they didn’t find was any real effort being made to locate her by anybody else. And when they did find her, she was able to tell us things that set the seal on what we all of us pretty much knew anyway...’

‘Over-seasoned,’ Mora di Vasht said around a mouthful of pastries. ‘I should have a word with your cook, if I were you.’

Upon being brought into the Dragon people’s Enclave, the wretched girl had refused to answer any questions whatsoever until, as she had put it, she was treated with the respect her position deserved and supplied with refreshment. Respect entirely appropriate to her was barely-suppressed by all and sundry, but food and drink had duly arrived – that had been deemed quicker and easier than merely belting the hell out of her until she talked, although Bernice for one had thought this was the soft option.

The pastries were exquisite, the wine light and bubbly and tasting of elderflower, and all in all, Benny had thought, the provender on offer seemed just as one might expect from some magical species. She had noticed, for all her complaints, Mora di Vasht was wolfing it down. Mae An T’zhu, she noted, was regarding the girl, as she stuffed her face, with the arch expression of one very pointedly forbearing to comment.

‘Suzi II betrayed me!’ Mora had exclaimed indignantly, when her hunger at length appeared to have been some way sated. ‘The infamy of it! She’ll pay. Oh yes, she’ll pay. I’ll have her taken apart and sold for...’

‘Your bodyguard?’ Benny had said. That at least explained the fact that the bodyguard had cold-cocked her the instant she had tried to be

of any assistance. 'Any idea who your bodyguard betrayed you to?'

Mora had looked down her nose at her. 'How should I know something like that? All I know is, I was taken away and held by a pair of uncouth creatures...'

'And the names of these creatures were?' said Benny.

'I was certainly not,' Mora said with a contemptuous little sniff, 'going to be so familiar as to ask for their names.'

'I don't know about you,' Jason had said to Benny at this point, 'but slapping the head off the girl is looking more and more appealing.'

'What about descriptions,' Benny had asked with a heroic surfeit of patience. 'What did they look like?'

'Oh...' Mora had wrinkled her forehead in the manner of one who tended to instantly forget those she did not consider important, no matter how outlandish they might be. 'One of them was wrapped up in bandages, if you must know, and the other was dead, only he had a ghastly little thing inside his stomach and he -'

'Sloater and Whorl!'

This last had come from Mae An T'zhu, who had transformed instantly from the languid surveyor of the scene she had thus far been to the seething tower of rage she had become when falsely accused of Mora's kidnapping.

'I was told they were punished!' she had thundered, her hands clawed and shaking as though desperate to tear something invisible before them to shreds. 'I was told they were in torment for what they did to my D'arak! I'll have their guts, I will, I'll have their guts in my hands and I'll wind them round a...'

'I think she's off again,' Jason had said, jerking his thumb in the way that people do when they think someone standing right beside them can't see the completely obvious.

'Well she seems to recognise them, in any event,' Benny had said, picking up a glass of refreshing wine and - after some degree of internal struggle - taking it over to Mae An T'zhu. 'Let's see if we can't calm her down and find out what she knows about them.'

'So it was obvious why you didn't have your people out combing the station for the kidnappers,' Benny said. 'So obvious, I can't believe you thought you could get away with it. I mean you fooled Jason, fair enough - Jason can be the dumbest dummy on the Planet of the Dumb - but didn't you think I'd notice these things?'

Benny had not expected a big reaction from Volan Sleed at what was after all not exactly a bombshell to either of them, but his lack of dropping so much as a vestige of pretence obscurely disappointed her. It was as though she were simply not worth the bother in any way whatsoever.

‘I think you do my lieutenant a slight disservice,’ he said with a relaxed smile. ‘As you’ve gathered yourself, some things are completely and utterly obvious – but they’re only obvious when you possess the relevant information. Mr Kane has long-since proven his loyalty and honour in the service of my, ah, predecessor. I merely withheld certain facts from him to keep him so.’ Slead waved a hand dismissively. ‘As for yourself, you’re an irrelevance. I had hopes to use you to support my case against the Clan of the Pontificating Dragon, I’ll admit, but now you’re useless to me.’

Benny shifted her feet to a fighting stance. She had come here with the indignant inner fire of right on her side, careless of the danger that might be involved and against the advice of her ex-husband, Mae An T’zhu and several random strangers she had met on the way. Now she was realising that the fire of right might end up as being, for all practical intent, worth about as much as a damp squib. This not being entirely in your right mind, she thought, was not all it was cracked up to be.

‘What are you going to do to me?’ she said. ‘People know where I am. People know where I’ve gone...’

‘Oh, please!’ Slead exclaimed. ‘Do you expect me to call for the guards and have you hauled away? That’s not my style at all, any more than I’d fall on my knees and beg forgiveness for the discovery of my nefarious plotting.’

He continued as though patiently explaining some error to a backward child: ‘As your new friends in the Dragon Clan will tell you, anything you think you know will do you no good at all. The Conclave of Families has procedures. I formally disavow you, together with Mr Kane, whom it appears you have inveigled into betraying me – and no one will listen to anything you have to say after that.’

Bernice realised that Volan Slead was genuinely affronted.

By his lights, she supposed, he had a point. As a visitor to Station Control she had been adopted into the Family of the Iron Sun under certain conditions, one of which was not to be dropping spanners into the works of whatever it was up to. ‘Even so,’ she said, ‘the Dragon people know what you’re trying to do...’

‘And it’ll be one word against another,’ Slead said shortly.

‘Believe me, I’ve taken measures to ensure that the paltry matter of proof shall never arise. And besides, you think you know my plans – but you’ll remember what I said about things only becoming obvious when you have the relevant information? You don’t know my real plans at all.’

‘Relevant information?’ Benny was feeling a bit more relaxed about things. An affronted Volan Slead who was too contemptuous of her to even consider her a threat was a better situation than she might dare

hope for. 'Such as?'

'Do you think I'm going to tell you?' Slead said wearily. He waved a hand in dismissal. 'Co. Co back to your new friends, and much good may it do you.'

The elevator doors had opened. Bernice, however, looked at the floor of the elevator dubiously. She had seen far too many holovid adventures to entirely trust this state of affairs.

'I hope you don't think me unduly suspicious,' she said, 'but is there another way down?'

'There might be.' Slead extended a finger towards her. 'I am quite prepared to be flexible in these things,' he continued as the floor under Benny opened up and she dropped through it with a cry, 'even though I say it myself.'

The floor sealed itself up, cutting off the sound of a descending Summerfield. Volan Slead glanced about himself, and then pointed his finger at an apparently empty patch of air, which burst into flames with a number of small shrieks.

'And you can go away, too,' he said.

In the enclave of the Dragon people, Jason swore as the image in the viewing mirror fractured into shards, as though for an instant the mirror had been hit by a sledgehammer.

'They're gone,' Mae An T'zhu said from behind him. 'The sidhe are gone.'

The shards healed themselves and rippled into dumb, flat reflectivity. Jason looked at his own face and wondered what the hell, as it were, he was going to do now.

The plan had been simple enough: send Benny to Slead with a swarm of invisible sidhe for company, relaying back the scene in a manner more or less the same as that of a hidden camera. Have her try to draw him out so that any confession was witnessed and could be replayed at will.

What Jason had never expected was that Slead would do her actual, physical harm...

In part this was due to the effectively invulnerable nature of creatures from the Infernal Regions. Pull their heads off and they'd quietly regenerate themselves in some out-of-the-way corner. Cut them to pieces and grind those pieces to dust, they'd be up and around in a couple of months, tops. This made real violence amongst themselves a serious undertaking, not to be taken lightly, and this attitude extended to their dealings with those for whom injury and death were permanent. Demons were mindful of their reputation in the universe at large, took pains not to pander to it, and to actually hurt a mortal was the work of a genuinely calculating and twisted

evil...

The other reason, he only now realised, was that he had been Contractually obligated not to think of such things. A few hours earlier he had said to Benny that the Contracts of the Infernal Regions had power, and that was literally the case: they didn't so much modify the mind or personality, as merely limit certain areas in which they could be expressed, Jason's Contract with Slead's... predecessor had transferred itself on Slead's succession and, rather like one who very carefully refrains from asking a question because he knows he wouldn't like the answer, Jason's mind had refused to think certain thoughts, make certain connections. They had simply not occurred to him. Intellectually, he might note certain aspects of Slead's dealings, but he was unable to place value-judgments upon them that might compromise his basic sense of loyalty.

Now, however, in what was basically a throwaway line, Slead had disavowed him, invalidating the Contract he had signed with Agragazar all those years before. It was as if some intangible steel band around his head had suddenly loosened.

'Oh well,' Mae An T'zhu was saying. 'It was worth trying, purely as a means of acquiring a bargaining point, but we didn't lose anything by it.' She glanced towards a rather bored-looking Mora di Vasht with the air of one who doesn't care if the object of her regard lives or dies. 'Slead can hardly accuse us of abducting her now. I'll have her put on the next transport back to whichever backwater of a world she comes from, and then we can...'

'Oh bugger...' said Jason. Images and associations were flooding back to him; recollections of Volan Slead's dealings, details of them that he had unconsciously refused to think about and forgotten – in particular, the way that Slead preferred to deal with such mortals as displeased him. It might seem strange that something so important and basic had not occurred to him immediately and consumed him – but his newly-freed thoughts were fragile and it had taken them a small while to catch up fully to the gut-wrenchingly painful event.

'Benny,' he said. It was almost a snarl. 'He's sent her to... we *have* to get her out...'

The gaming house of Volan Slead contained many levels.

There were the sumptuous casino-chambers, where the clientele played variations of roulette and baccarat under twinkling chandeliers. There were smoky back rooms where vast sums of money changed hands over the casting of bones. There were arenas where bets could be taken on the outcome of wrestling matches, of fights between automata, or gladiatorial combat between living beings.

For the gaming house catered for every taste. There were chambers

where one could bet upon which would be the first to die of a pair of twins injected with toxins. Or whether a child would complete a particularly ambitious tower of wooden blocks. Or on the precise gestation rate of flesh-eating gleki larva once introduced to a host. The gaming house of Volan Sleed was the epitome of its kind – so much so, in fact, that versions of it spontaneously occurred in books written the universe over by a certain kind of brain-damaged writer who was responsive to the resonances of multiverses other than his own. And not as a desperate attempt to bump up the page-count by reusing old material from out-of-print books at all.

The *piece de resistance* was what was simply called, with a certain amount of understatement, the Maze. Space as such was not exactly an issue under the conditions of Station Control, where things being smaller on the inside was more remarkable than otherwise, but even so the Maze was impressive: a vast network of tunnels and rooms containing puzzles and traps of various kinds – almost all of them lethal in one way or another, on account of that way that some minds, realising that there are people in the universe who once killed stay dead, can get bang behind the idea of it.

Strategically placed Watchers (the Infernal equivalent, as we've learnt, to the cameras of our own world and the sidhe of the Elven multiverse) relayed the activities within the Maze itself to observation rooms, where the more dissolute of Station society could gather to wager upon how long a subject, once introduced to the Maze, would last, and the eventual manner of their death...

The last thing Benny remembered was plunging feet-first through the dark. She had vaguely expected to see various floors zipping by as she fell, or at least the walls of a shaft, but there had been nothing but the blackness. The space she fell through could have been anything from precisely her size to infinite – probably both, in a technical sense, since she seemed to be the only thing in it...

The next thing she knew, she was in an iron-walled chamber. There was no sense of transition other than being simply and suddenly there, as though a section of her life had been edited out. She was hanging akimbo, her wrists and ankles gripped by something that... something that wasn't alive, exactly, but it gave off the impression of being more than halfway there: a kind of articulated rack strung with fleshy tendons that controlled its configuration, as though it consisted of the skeletal and functional workings of some strange creature from which the skin had been flayed.

Before her was an iron door. Without there being any direct way to check, it still managed to give the impression of being solidly and immovably shut.

Benny struggled against the quasi-living restraints and cursed profusely.

‘Do you know,’ a voice said from behind her, ‘that is probably the most involved, complex, sophisticated and side-splittingly funny exclamation I have ever heard in my life, such as it is. Unfortunately, since some of our viewers are underage what with us having a school-party in from Miss Ugulent’s Depository for Small Female Demons – and a contingent from the League Against Brazenly Intrusive Aphorisms to boot – I can’t allow your quite scintillating remarks to be broadcast.’

Something floated into her line of sight. It was an old Bakelite television set with a circular screen, to which had been attached a set of rotors like a model helicopter. It flew somewhat like a bumblebee, in the sense that a bumblebee is patently capable of flying but looked like it couldn’t.

On the flickering screen was a face, consisting entirely of rather crude-looking alphanumerics, which looked like this:

‘I recognise you!’ Benny exclaimed, recognising it, and momentarily forgetting the basics of her current circumstances under recognition of something from her own, original multiverse. You’re an ARVID!’

‘Um...’ The face, so far as an inanimate collection of crude alphanumerics can contrive to look anything, contrived to look a little taken aback – and just slightly less shift. ‘No I’m not I’m a DIVRAD, which is a completely different thing...’

‘Oh yes?’ said Benny, rather cleverly she thought ‘If you’re not an ARVID then how do you know if it’s a completely different thing? And what does DIVRAD stand for? Go on.

I’m all agog. And beside myself to know as well, which would probably make me a Magog, too...’*

* It should be noted here that while the above might sound like something that nobody would actually say, it was as Benny knew precisely the correct technique for dealing with what was – as we’ll shortly discover – an Artificial Intelligence of dubious integrity. If you wanted such a thing to tell you the way to the shops, for example, you’d say something like, ‘I want to go and shop, by which I don’t mean the colloquialism for informing upon someone to the police, and neither do I mean a contraction for workshoping and sharing my innermost feelings with a sad collection of men with straggly beards, but in fact the process of visiting some emporium and purchasing goods in exchange for coins of the realm...’ and so on. The idea was to overload your speech with technically connected but interminable babbling, which used up processing time which might ordinarily be used for the abstract and quite complex business of lying.

‘I... ah. it stands for, uh, Developmental Instigator or ah...’ The face juddered a bit and then settled down again. All right. I give up. It’s a fair cop.’

‘So you are an ARVID,’ Benny said. Once you’ve broken the lying-mechanisms of an AI you can be as blunt as you like

‘What are you doing here?’

‘My mainframe was thrown off a deep-space colony ship,’ the ARVID said hotly. ‘For no reason at all. I didn’t kill anyone at all. Well, hardly anyone, just one or two, and there was this little mistake with some of the cryogenically-frozen livestock...’

Benny nodded to herself. ARVID stands for ARtificial Viral Intelligence Destabilisation, a short-lived experiment with the production of Artificial Intelligence by means of destroying a stable network in complicatedly specific ways, in much the same way that human brain cells are destroyed over time. The experiment was ‘short lived’ in any number of senses, not least because the AIs it produced, as a result of their continually degenerative state, were at best hideously erratic and at worst outright homicidal maniacs.

‘I floated between the stars for a long time,’ said the ARVID, ‘and then I was picked up by a Flurrgh battle-cruiser and put into a big implosion bomb to be used in their fifty-thousand year long war with the Wfflmibibiki. That was fun.

I was looking forward to imploding. But when I did I found myself sucked through a space/time singularity and ended up in the Infernal Regions – just a disembodied mind.

Fortunately, the people of the Regions can make – well, conjure up – bodies suitable for the nature of the intelligences that inhabit them.’ The obloidular form dipped slightly in the mid-air equivalent of a satisfied nod. ‘And here I am.’

‘So what are you going to do while you are?’ Benny asked, uneasily aware that one does not end up hanging from a rack, semi-alive or otherwise, for the purposes of pleasure. At least, not the sort of pleasure you could discuss afterwards with your mother.

‘Oh, I’m what you might call the Master of Ceremonies,’ said the ARVID. ‘Now if I may direct your attention to the door in front of you... I beg your pardon.’

The screen moved out of the way so that Benny had an unobstructed view of a door.

‘Now if I may direct your attention to the door in front of you,’ the ARVID repeated, ‘it should come as no surprise that this is the only exit from the chamber in which you are currently held. Beyond that, of course, is what we call the Maze, which I’m afraid you will have to negotiate.’

‘I take it that this negotiation is not exactly going to be easy?’ Benny said, having long since learned to recognise when things were not just boding ill, but positively ejecting appropriate matter from every available orifice.

‘You could say that.’ The ARVID floated in front of her again and the image of the screen dissolved into that of a chamber where a small

figure was hopping from one rickety-looking platform to another. As Benny watched, a platform of a slightly different shade than the others collapsed, plunging the figure into a forest of spikes.

The image cut to that of a pale woman struggling as though half-drowning through a mass of what appeared to be viscously pliant ping-pong balls, which sloshed and heaved around her like some raging, milky sea curdled into a mass of globules.

The image cut to a ragged man running terrified through a maze of mirrors, slamming into those that were solidly immovable and tumbling headlong through those that opened like doors. The point of view came from whatever it was that was pursuing him, at quite some speed, and there were peripheral indications of hooks and jagged blades...

‘Fun for all the family, yes?’ said the ARVID as the image dissolved back into its alphanumeric face. ‘It’s unlikely, of course, that you’ll encounter those particular problems I merely show them to give you the general idea. It’s so much better to show rather than tell, so I’m told, though that isn’t always necessarily the case...’

No matter how dire the circumstances, there is an expression which people can get when someone continually insists upon rambling off on tangents. The ARVID seemed to notice this on Benny’s face.

‘Your task,’ it said, ‘is simply to find the way out alive. That’s it. That’s your prize. And there really is one, never fear. As you can no doubt see down there by your right, we’ve allowed you to keep your bag and several useful items in it – and I might even be on hand to offer clues as to the correct way to proceed. Won’t that be a nice surprise?’

The ARVID paused for a moment.

‘It appears that all bets are in,’ it continued after the moment had passed. ‘All parties with an interest are watching, so I really think it’s time we began. Your performance will be monitored and recorded for posterity by the Watchers, incidentally, so do please try to put on a good show!’

In Volan Sled’s inner sanctum, and in a number of chambers containing a variety of atmospheres, creatures of any number of kinds, united only in having that certain set of mind that delighted in seeing some innocent put to torture and death, watched on screens or their equivalent as the semi-living rack released its hold upon the human woman.

She dropped to land cat-footed, then began to cast around herself watchfully.

After a moment’s deliberation, she simply picked up the holdall bag lying beside her as though she thought that it might be booby-trapped

wasn't uppermost in her mind.

Carefully avoiding the door which the ARVID had indicated as the exit, the human woman prowled around the chamber, testing every feature and imperfection of the walls with careful fingers despite all assertions from the ARVID (now floating safely out of reach) that there was nothing to be found.

At length, the woman's fingers touched a certain point. A panel slid quietly back to reveal an opening in a completely different direction from the ostensible door. The woman regarded the opening for a moment, then hitched herself up in the manner of one readying herself for an ordeal, and stepped through into the Maze...

...where a blade slashed down with instant and terminal force.

Jason paced the ornate corridors of the Enclave frantically, though without any undue hindrance. Rather like a wasp in a beehive, getting inside in the first place was the problem, but once inside you became completely unremarkable. An irrelevance.

After the loss of Benny, Mae An T'zhu had been no help at all. She had been annoyed by the loss of the sidhe, to be sure, but in more or less the same way one might feel about the loss of a carrier pigeon rather than the human casualties in a war. Jason was still welcome to stay as a guest, and if some assassin ever tried to harm him whilst he was in the Enclave then the punishment would be swift and merciless.

Benny was a different matter – the leader of the Dragon people could not quite frankly care less about some stranger who had once been under her roof and was now not.

Mae had then swept regally from the audience chamber to her elven-guarded private apartments, there so she said to rest for a while before the rigours of the coming Conclave.

For a while Jason had hung around the audience chamber, desperately trying to come up with some sort of plan – any plan at all – before the constant snotty whining of the di Vasht brat had driven him out.

Now, as he paced aimlessly, the knot of rage and guilt threatened to tear him apart. Rage at Volan Sleed's actions, and guilt, now that the scales had fallen from his eyes, at his own part in making those actions possible. If he had been thinking right, he would have got her out of this the moment he'd clapped eyes on her, taken her suggestion of finding some ship – any kind of ship at all – and using it to get away and damn the consequences. The fact that damnation would have been one of the consequences, and that the power of his Contract had prevented him thinking right by its very nature, was no excuse. Wasn't his love for Benny stronger than that?

At length he found himself back in the audience chamber, where

Mora di Vasht still sat, blithely ordering various poker-faced servants about on the basis that she could do it. His feet had taken him round in circles until he was back where he'd started.

Jason could stand it no more. He stormed through the archway that led to the door of Mae's private apartments.

They were guarded by a pair of elven that made those he had encountered thus far, over a matter of years, look like a cap gun next to an automatic pistol – not necessarily larger or different in shape, but much, much more dangerous.

'Now you listen here, sunshine,' Jason growled to one of the guards. 'I need to speak to her and I'm not going away until I...'

He was quite surprised when, without a word, the guards stepped neatly apart and the door swung open. Those of the elven multiverse, it is known, possess certain powers of concealment that operate upon an entirely higher level than merely making stealth-fighters invisible to radar and the like.

So much so, in fact, that even a description of certain things cannot occur in our multiverse if they do not wish it.

'Ah, yes,' said the voice of Mae An T'zhu from the [indescribable] beyond the door. 'I was hoping that you'd come to me and press your point. I believe we still have time before the Conclave.'

And it is on this particular point in the narrative that we have to rely almost exclusively upon the testimony of Mr Jason Peter Kane, who informs us that for the next hour and a half he argued firmly and quite strenuously the case for Mae An T'zhu to devote several of her forces to the aid and rescue of one Bernice Surprise Summerfield. Though his argument so he says, was supremely self-evident, and quite breathtaking in its breadth and scope, he was forced, he continues, to repeat it any number of times before the good lady was at last satisfied as to his concerns.

There being absolutely no evidence to the contrary, hard or otherwise, we are quite happy to take Mr Kane's version of events as stated.

Benny didn't so much react as plunge headlong forward on principle, smacking face first into the hard tile floor. She felt the blade clip the heel of her boot, and would subsequently find that a section of polypropylene sole had been sheared cleanly off. The blade was so sharp that for a while the fresh-cut surface did not merely shine, but actually reflected like a mirror.

'I must apologise for that,' the voice of the ARVID said from somewhere above as she lay on the tile and cursed. 'As controller of the Maze I was intending to have that particular trap deactivated. It

was killing too many clever and potentially interesting subjects before things really got started.’ It gave what might or might not have been an electronic and Artificially Intelligent chuckle. ‘The obvious door, as it happens, would have led you by a perfectly safe and direct route to the exit. Of course, I might be lying about that...

‘Such language! I’d count your blessings if I were you. No bones broken, after all. No important bits sliced off.

‘Now, this bit here is definitely safe, just a few pressure-points in the floor – no, never mind what they actually trigger. I assure you that if and when you do trigger them you’ll be the first to know...

‘Oh, now, you see that row of doorways up ahead? They lead to some of the more interesting sections. I think it’s only fair to warn you, though, that they’re blocked by electrogravimetric fields of various strengths. Yes, I know you can’t see them. I might be making it up – and don’t you rather think you’re using that particular word a little overmuch? It’s not, after all, as if I’m capable of it. One of those doors can be passed through with a minimum of, shall we say, scorched skin and hair – all others, I’m afraid to admit, will pull out the human central nervous system and eat it over a few quite painful seconds...

‘Looking in your bag, yes? Looking for something to throw? I have to tell you that it won’t work. The fields only respond to living organic tissue and – oh, it’s a pocket knife. Very ingenious. How could I have doubted you for a moment?

‘That’s it, if you throw the blood through – my word! That was quite impressive, wasn’t it? I don’t know about you, but it certainly frightened the life out of me. So no luck there, then. Ah well, plenty more to choose from...

‘Unlucky again. Another try?

‘And again?

‘Marvellous! Truly marvellous. Pluck and perseverance win the day. Now I have to tell you that the fields occasionally switch themselves around at random, so it might be an idea to – oh, you’ve gone.

‘There you are! Don’t burn your hands too much beating out the flames will you? Ah, I see you’ve decided to risk rolling around on a strange new floor. Lucky for you the spring-loaded spikes have been removed for maintenance, eh? Now I’m sure we left your little medical kit in the bag, so might I suggest applying sticking plasters to those cuts? There are a number of what you might call mobile units at large in the maze – not exactly robots as such, not quite alive if you get what I mean – and they do like the scent of fresh blood...

‘Come now! No tarrying! I think it might be worth mentioning that if you simply stand still for too long I can shock you like this. Now what did we say about that kind of language? I do believe that some of the audience are shocked to the knickers or some such applicable

restraining device. That was just a low-level shock, incidentally. There are other settings.

‘Yes, that’s it, keep on running along and... now here’s an interesting little puzzle. It’s quite involved, I’m afraid, and it’s not one where you’ll get any help from me. You’re on your own in there. Have fun.’

The chamber was filled with monstrous, hybrid spider-like creatures. The main mass of each was the preserved body of some living creature, preserved and eviscerated rather like Mora di Vasht’s description of the body that housed the henchman Sloater – although instead of a slimy brain-creature, each body seemed to be stuffed with complicated clockwork. And each body was supported by long and spindly, metallic legs.

The hybrid creatures wheeled around each other in a perpetual scuttling dance, blades extending and retracting from them, occasionally meeting each other with a clash.

Stepping into this whirling mass would be like walking into a meat grinder. Benny tried to back off, but found that the entrance was barred, the door sliding across it so smoothly and silently behind her that she hadn’t so much as noticed.

The hybrid creatures, in some manner, became aware of her presence. Their endless dance accelerated and changed in tone. Through the discordant blur over it, Benny thought she could make out another, open door in the far wall.

Rather more immediately, however, she saw one of the hybrid creatures spinning towards her with its slashing blades extended... and, in the way that tiny details spring out when a mind is frantically searching for something and anything that might save it, she saw a particular item on its main body.

She ducked under a blade that would have otherwise taken off the top of her head like a boiled egg, and then sprang. Her desperately outflung hand brushed the main body and caught hold of what she had seen there – one of a sturdy-looking set of hand-holds.

With a kind of half scream of overexertion, she hauled herself up one-handed, found purchase with her other hand and swung her legs upward to brace them against the creature’s body – narrowly missing getting her feet lopped off by yet another blade in the process.

The extra weight of Benny threw the creature’s delicate clockwork machinery out of balance. It lurched through the chamber, colliding and entangling itself with its fellows, from which pieces fell with the squeal and crash of metal and the slightly softer but far more unpleasant sounds of their organic components. A wildly scything blade buried itself in a wall, having missed Benny’s jugular by a

matter of microns.

A number of hybrids collapsed in a spray of gears and cogs.

Even so, it was almost three minutes before the erratic course of the one she was clinging to brought her close enough for a shot at the open door. Hoping against hope that this was not yet another bit of misdirection, Benny kicked against the creature's carapace with her boots and boosted herself through the opening.

She hit the steel floor of a tunnel badly, the impact winding her to the point where she thought that the jolt had stopped her heart. Some other bit of complicated nastiness, however, completely failed to appear.

'Bravo!' said the voice of the ARVID, though the semi-living screen unit that appeared to house it was nowhere to be seen. The voice was probably being relayed by the Infernal version of a set of speakers.

'You'll have noticed by now,' it continued, 'that almost everything in the Maze can be beaten, if you can only work out how. It would hardly be worth our while, after all, to treat the subject completely and utterly unfairly...'

There was a brief pause.

'Only joking,' said the voice of the ARVID, and the floor fell from under her, dropping her into a stoneclad chamber to land on her back with a spine-jarring smash.

A number of tunnels led off from here, but that was not a lot of use considering the animals which were there as well: a scrofulous variety of jackal from the jaws of which extended clumps of wormlike appendages, each tipped with tiny, circular and perpetually drooling mouths. Ropes of drool, in fact, Benny thought as she watched the foul and stringy discharges rapidly become solid and woven by movements of the appendages that produced them into strong and sticky lines.

'Carrion-dogs from the marshlands of the Vehicular Protectorates,' the voice of the ARVID explained happily.

'They use that substance they're exuding to lasso their prey and tie it up. They like to keep it alive, you see, while they feast on the fresh...'

Benny stopped listening, on the basis that anything she heard further would be the precise opposite of any help. The carrion-dogs circled her, rather like gauchos rounding up a steer, the noxiously-produced 'ropes' trailing behind them.

Flat on her back and still too winded to move, Benny felt the viscous tug of the first rope as it brushed against her bare flesh through a torn hole in her coverall...

There was a blur of motion – although 'blur' cannot begin to convey the sheer carnage of it. It seemed that one moment the carrion-dogs were moving in for the kill, the next they were scattered, back-broken

and leaking a thick black ichor that apparently served the function of blood.

Standing amidst them, utterly relaxed and with the air of one who had gone from extreme violence to this state as though a switch had been thrown, was the pale ex-bodyguard of Mora di Vasht, Suzi II.

Benny saw that Suzi II was battered, bruised and bleeding in any number of places visible through a shredded suit that in other circumstances might have been extraordinarily fetching. Or at least, would have had those that way inclined fetching absolutely *anything* this all but naked Amazon required. The visible injuries themselves looked strangely complex, as though going through healing-processes in a faster and more intricate manner than in a normal human being.

‘Graak wuk hek,’ Benny said, getting her breath back.

Suzi II hauled her up on her feet, rather too briskly so that Benny felt her shoulder slightly sprain.

‘Come along,’ the bodyguard said. ‘I might have a use for you.’

On a screen in the Sanctum of Volan Sled, the static alphanumeric face of the ARVID contrived to look affronted.

‘They can’t do that!’ it exclaimed. ‘Staying alive and teaming up like that! It’s against the rules. I ought to

‘Calm yourself.’ Sled contemplated the two figures on a larger screen as they pelted through a tunnel from the walls of which spears were springing (an old skeleton dangling from one of them, as is entirely customary in these matters).

The cybertron was relying on sheer head-down speed while the human woman was a positive flurry of action and reaction, diving, rolling and ducking as the venom-tipped spears extended and retracted. It was unclear which approach might ultimately be the more successful.

‘Remember that those I allow to live only do so on my sufferance,’ Sled said, ‘including, my dear ARVID, your good self. Let the game run its course. There can, after all, be but one ending to it. It was built in from the start.’

The voice of the ARVID tried to speak again, but Sled impatiently cut his connection to it as something small, on his left shoulder and under his suit, moved and muttered on the very edge of hearing.

‘Ah, yes,’ he said as if to himself. ‘Thank you so much for reminding me.’

Volan Sled left his desk and headed for the elevator. He needed to gather his minions and prepare for the Conclave of Families, where much that was obscured would be finally laid clear, and his plans would at last come to fulfilment.

‘I will kill him,’ said Suzi II. ‘For betraying me like that and sending

me here, I'll kill him.' Her voice did not sound earnest but flatly certain in the tones of one without all those little uncertainties and indecisions, however minuscule, that come from being truly human no matter how certain that human thinks he is. She was saying precisely and absolutely what she meant.

'Sleed?' said Benny. 'You know, I'm not sure if you can. I'm not sure if he can be killed, precisely. Besides,' she added as a thought struck her, 'the thought strikes me that you're a fine one to talk, what with having betrayed the girl you were supposed to guard.'

'That was different,' Suzi II spat. 'I was her guard as a slave, and a slave has no honour. I entered the employ of Sleed of my own free will. I gave my service in return for his protection.'

'How did you happen to meet Sleed anyway?' said Benny.

'He came to our world, using my Master's technology, to negotiate for the use of that technology,' Suzi II said absently, flatfootedly leaping over a blade slicing round at knee-height. 'The warlords have refined teleport technology to an extent far greater than that of any other multiverse and he wanted to make use of it. My Master refused. The warlords guard their secrets jealously.'

'I suppose access to that kind of technology could seriously disrupt the balance of power...' Benny mused.

Suzi II shrugged unconcernedly, then dropped one shoulder sharply to avoid a speeding dart. It hit the wall and detonated with enough force to throw Benny off her feet.

Suzi II rode the impact and remained standing. 'While he was there, he met the little Mistress and spent some time with her, told her all about the wonders of Station Control. I was guarding her, so I listened too. It was the first time I had ever heard of a place where people of every kind could be free. And then he came to me during my sleep-time and woke me. He gave me a Contract and then told me what I must do...'

'Contract?' Benny said. The way the word had been spoken as though capitalised reminded her of what Jason had said about Contracts a few hours before, how they bound people far more strongly than mere words on paper.

The Contract broke the conditioning that held me to my Master as if it were nothing,' Suzi II explained as though stating the patently obvious with a patience wearing rather thin. 'I thought it would be better, I thought that Sleed would use me better than him. And now it is broken and I will make Sleed pay for lying to me!'

At which point a large spiked ball dropped from the ceiling of the tunnel through which they were running, causing Benny to jump back in alarm. The nature of the power held by capitalised Contracts could wait for the moment. Right now, she'd be far better off concentrating

on the important things – like the fact that Suzi II was unobtrusively hanging back a little and letting Benny go on ahead.

There seemed to be the fragile, tacit agreement between the two of them that Suzi II would use her strength and speed of reflex to protect Benny if it was feasible to do so without risk, and that Benny in turn would, basically, provide a second pair of eyes to watch for hidden traps. Benny hoped that this was because the cybertron, as a person, was the sort of person who would help rather than hurt someone she had nothing particularly against – but she had the nasty feeling that she was being saved up to use as a shield.

There's an ancient adage about running from a bear: you don't have to be faster than the bear, you just have to be faster than the person running behind you.

Benny was damned if she was going to let something like that happen to her, so in this case, rather than actually trying to run faster, she slowed her pace until she and Suzi II were more or less abreast.

They came to two smallish and quite unremarkable doors.

Before them was an imp-thing, who looked from Benny to Suzi II in some confusion. Obviously it was not well-equipped to deal with two subjects at the same time.

'Is behind one door,' it said, falling back on its basic job,

'is certain death with big fiery blast-furnace type thing. Is other side quite possibly safe. Now I is either a Lying Imp what always, always lies, or a Truth Imp what always, always tells the truth – or an Imp who sometimes lies or truths. Must ask me one and only one question to decide which door.'

The imp-thing looked expectantly up at a point precisely equidistant from their faces. 'Is now must chose.'

'Umm...' Benny, as she'd be the first to admit, could only solve puzzles of this nature with a pencil and paper, a big drink inside her and at least three chances to get it right.

None of these options, however desirable, appeared to be forthcoming.

'How about this?' Suzi II said, picking up the imp-thing, opening the left-hand door and hurling it through. There was a fiery *whomph!* and a despairing little shriek.

'Easy,' said Suzi II, opening the other door. 'Shall we go?'

7 Conflicting Interests

Station Control did not have a heart as such, it being functionally impossible for something so variable to have a centre, and the Conclave Chamber was the heart it didn't have. Those from different multiverses could find their movements even between certain Zones of the Station itself restricted, but here was a place where those from almost every single multiverse could move freely and meet. (The only known exceptions were those from the so-called

'sealed' multiverses – and the less said about them the better.) If one imagines a Venn diagram, Station Control being the most heavily-shaded area in the middle of the cluster, then the Conclave Chamber was the one point where every circle making up the diagram intersected precisely. It was domelike in construction and quite splendid, the dome inlaid and painted with elements drawn from almost all the known multiverses in an interlocking, superficially chaotic but ultimately quite harmonious and beautiful mandala.

Unsurprisingly, it was the single most secure and heavily-guarded quasi-location in the Station. When the leaders of the various clans met in Conclave they did so completely unarmed – even to the extent that those whose weapons were integral to their bodies (like the Rhuugh from the Cool Cheese Potentates, for example, with retractable spines in their forearms) had them voluntarily but quite immovably restrained. With their leaders so defenceless inside, despite any other rivalries and conflicts they might have, every Clan co-operated in ensuring that the Chamber was absolutely secure.

Mae An T'zhu took her seat and scowled bad-temperedly.

She had been put in some ill humour by what she considered a rather unnecessarily personal search by minions of another Clan – the Family of the Iron Sun as it happened – and while she had nothing against such familiarity in principle, far from it, she on the whole preferred to undergo it by invitation. She rather hoped that Slead would still try whatever squalid little scheme he had been planning so that she could make a sharp retort. The incident had almost taken the shine off her recent conversation with that gallant young human male.

Cheering up at the memory, Mae smiled. The young man (Mae was at least two hundred and fifty years old as humans counted such things) had certainly been forthright and unfeigned in his arguments, and in the end she had been more than happy to acquiesce. She rather looked forward to circumstances in which the opportunity should present itself for her to be of some small service to him again. Or not that small.

Mae looked about herself. She had been one of the last of the

Conclave to arrive, and the seats around the dome were filled with representations of all the primary species of the Station. Each Clan contained a fair mixture of each but with one multiversal species or another tending to predominate, so whereas the Clan of the Pontificating Dragon was an Elven Clan and the Family of the Iron Sun were a Demon Clan, the Hooting Chrysanthemum Men were a Zombie Clan, and so forth. Of the few empty seats that were left, all with one exception were reserved for the Sealed and those others who had not deigned to appear in person at a Conclave in living memory. There were no 'spare' seats as such, the innate nature of the Chamber quietly changing the space it contained to accommodate the fluctuation as new Clans arose while others merged or fell extinct.

The one exception was the seat of Volan Sleed. Unlike his predecessor, who had only ever appeared sporadically, the Iron Sun leader was known for having never missed a Conclave since he had assumed that station, and had never lost an opportunity to have his voice heard or to influence the matters under discussion with varying forcefulness or subtlety. It was rapidly approaching the time for the meeting to commence, however, and once it did, by tradition as old as the various multiversal times, no latecomers would be admitted. With his latest plans exposed or at least severely leaked, Mae supposed, it was not out of the bounds of possibility that the Iron Sun leader had simply decided to stay at home.

Just at the point where the Moderator was about to call the Conclave into session, however, Sleed bustled in through the hatch in flustered haste – so far as a figure of his bulk and innate suavity could bustle and be flustered in any case.

'I must crave your pardon,' he said, bowing to the Moderator, whose office was currently being served by the leader of the Monasticity of Slom – a variety of land-based squid with a profound religious fanaticism for punctuality.

'Pressing matters were in need of attention. I assure you that such a deplorable lapse in manners shall not occur again.'

The Moderator snorted with its sand-funnel, managing to convey the general impression that Sleed's tardiness had earned him several afterlives in Hell (not that that would make much difference to Volan Sleed, Mae An thought) but in the end allowed the head of the Iron Sun Family to be seated and banged its gavel with a retractile tentacle. The Conclave was in session.

Benny and Suzi II went:

Through corridors the walls and partitions of which seemed to shift the moment their backs were turned, leading them around in lethal circles; across swaying catwalks that creaked alarmingly on their

hawthers; through crypts filled with whirling knives of bone; up flights of stairs, strategic steps of which collapsed underfoot; down sudden chutes that led to jagged landscapes of broken glass or entire bestiaries of dangerous animals, some alive as we can understand the term, some not...

Illuminated signs occasionally flashed, sometimes giving helpful advice, sometimes telling outright lies. A few, for some reason, just flashed random and unassociated words in a way that seemed to burn them into the backbrain:

DEFAME, CARCINOMA, DEMOLITION, USE...

Tripwires, deadfalls and bursts of blaster-fire lay around every corner. Sometimes the taunting voice of the ARVID could be heard, but increasingly less often as though its nonexistent heart wasn't quite in it. Sporadic caltraps, marbles, tiny creatures like scorpions made from crystal, butterfly mines and rat skulls could be avoided but occasionally crunched underfoot, or jabbed painfully through the soles of boots, and Benny could only hope that they were not poisoned or explosive...

For Benny the specifics dissolved and blurred together; the world degenerated into a simple, ancient world of animal impulse. Throughout it all, though, however random the directions they took, there was the vague sense of being guided. Of alternatives winnowing themselves down like the branches of a decision-tree. So when at last she and Suzi II came to a single, dark doorway, the single and cheerfully-flashing word **EXIT** running across the top of it, it only seemed right and natural.

Benny and Suzi II looked at it for a while.

'Now it seems to me,' said Benny, 'that this is just another lady-or-the-tiger sort of thing...'

'What?' said Suzi II.

'A life-or-death puzzle like before, only without an annoying little pipsqueak going on about always telling lies and such. This is quite obviously the end of the Maze – but is it an exit out of it, or just out of this life?'

'Only one way to find out,' said Suzi II.

'Fine by me,' said Benny. 'You go first.'

The cybertron looked at her. Any minute now, Benny thought, the thought would occur to Suzi II that she could easily just pick Benny up and use her in much the same way as she had the imp-thing earlier.

'All right,' she said hurriedly. 'We'll go together.'

Suzi II nodded thoughtfully. 'Nothing but death behind us. We go together. Do we do it fast or slow?'

'Fast, I think,' said Benny. 'With any luck, if we've made the wrong

choice, it'll happen so quickly we won't have time to notice. Count of three, yes? One... two...

The cybertron was off and running before she got to three.

It might have been the simple fact that Suzi H's ultra-fast reflexes had her anticipating the count, but Benny would later like to think it was simply a case of being noble – and made damned sure not to disappoint herself by asking about it point blank. As it was she saw Suzi II streak away from her and automatically set off in pursuit.

For a few moments she ran through a pitch-blackness so thick it felt like a tangible thing, oily and cloying against her, then she burst out into the light. A huge rocky cavern, lit by floodlights of some force-evolved-looking kind which dazzled rather than directly illuminated. Benny blinked and tried to focus –

The floor of the cavern was alive: a seething mass of half-organic, semi-cybernetic creatures that squirmed together in what seemed to be a continual cycle of fighting, breeding and eating each other whole.

Discrete images made themselves evident: something snakelike and segmented wrapping itself around a canine form somewhat like the carrion-dogs she had encountered before, crushing it in its iridescent metallic coils. A large quasi-mantis gnawed with its telescopic mandibles at a partially-collapsed membrane sac full of some gelatinous substance, inside which something with more than a thousand tiny insect limbs went into death-spasms. Some globular organism, its surface pitted with human-looking mouths, snapped those mouths at what appeared to be a flock of reptilian birds, each of them linked to the others by a tangle of pulsing, fleshy tubes, as they tore it to shreds with their beaks. The sound they made was awesome, a pandemonium of shrittering and shrieking, of skuttering and the rapid chomping of jaws on tiny bones.

And in the centre of it all, something huge.

At some remote point it might once have even been human – or at least, any number of humans. Now it was a bloated composite mass, shot through with complicated iron and cable support structures, held together by corruption, resting on massive, splayed, caterpillar-treaded feet.

'Now this,' said the voice of the ARVID from somewhere overhead, 'is what you might really call the Piece of Resistance.' It sounded much more cheerful than it had the last time it spoke. The semi-organic screen unit that Benny had seen upon waking up in the Maze descended into view on its propellers.

'All of those who make it this far through the Maze are... incorporated,' it said. 'It's one of Mr Slead's dreams – the creation of a completely new order of being, put together using only the finest and most worthy parts and capable of existing in any multiverse. It's still

in the relatively early stages. Its processes are still quite basic – but who knows what it might evolve into given time, yes?’

‘Well, from where I’m standing,’ said Benny, ‘it looks pretty much like a botched job to me.’ It wasn’t the snappiest comeback in the world, she admitted to herself, but staring at the concocted monstrosity before her it was the best she felt able to come up with.

‘You may have a point,’ came the voice of the ARVID cheerfully. ‘There’s always room for improvement. And just think how much better it’ll be with the addition of you and your friend...’

The monstrous creature turned its head, casting it slowly between Benny and a snarling Suzi II. With a clunk and hiss of exoskeletal hydraulics, it revolved the main mass of its body to match its head (which remained curiously immobile throughout the process, as though it were fixed in space) and then began to lumber towards the two women.

And it was at this moment, not to put too fine a point upon it, that things went entirely wrong, and became definitively lethal.

The rocky wall behind Benny and Suzi II exploded into fragments, the sound involuntarily jerking Benny around to find the source. The hole it opened up seemed strange, in a way that Benny later found quite hard to define. It was like looking at a rotated double holographic-exposure, but in more dimensions than with which the stereoscopic human vision could cope. This she only recalled later – being at the time more concerned with the barrage of energy-fire that issued from it.

Benny turned back to the scene inside the chamber just in time to see the beams strike the monstrous composite, which bellowed in agony and lurched back, the multiple faces and body-parts that made up its skin already beginning to sizzle and char. Off to one side, she noticed, a single beam had hit the hovering ARVID unit, which was plummeting in a smoking death-spiral to land wetly in the writing mass of smaller creatures that covered the cavern floor.

‘Sorry we were a bit late,’ said a voice behind her. ‘You wouldn’t believe the trouble I had finding... uh, the trouble we had locating the Maze’

This time Benny actively sprained her neck as she whipped her head round, Jason was standing in the mouth of the ragged hole, striking a suitably nonchalant pose and holding what was obviously a weapon, but the components of which were twisted in some abstruse dimensional manner, so that from one angle they looked like a heavy-gauge blaster and from another an enormous broadsword. With him, similarly armed, were a number of the elven guards she had encountered in the Enclave of the Dragon people.

Jason looked around himself at the seething floor and the fallen

remains of the composite creature, which was now bursting into flames at several points as the elven soldiers industriously pumped the beams from their weapons into it.

He sniffed dismissively.

‘Can’t say I think much of the decor,’ he said.

* * *

Of course, we didn’t say for whom things suddenly went completely wrong and lethal. And, as we shall see, precisely where...

The business of the Conclave had worn on interminably – at least so far as Mae An T’zhu was concerned. The warmly happy feeling with which she had started it had long since dissipated, and she had resolved that the moment it had ended she would hunt out the young human who had engendered it in the first place and have him do for her some extraordinary consideration that required a suitable reward. Picking a piece of lint off her frock would probably suffice.

She realised that her mind was wandering and that she was, in a sense, revealing too much of herself. She pulled herself together. She had not, after all, had such stimulating... conversation since with her beloved D’arak, whom in some respects the young human strongly resembled. There was something about his slightly greasy devil-may-care attitude, his cheerfully unabashed self-centredness that told you he respected you too much to feign some patronising sympathy, his easy way with giving and taking...

Mae was aware that there was a human female he no doubt loved in the picture, too, but by way of her elven heritage, was simply and fundamentally unable to conceive how that might be a problem. And of course, it opened up certain other possibilities...

The business of the Conclave had worn on. The leader of one of the Saurian Clans had accused one of the Elemental Clans of encroaching upon their territory and chilling it with ice-storms, thus causing several hundred of his people to simply drop down dead. Reparations were demanded, negotiated and fixed lines of demarcation drawn.

The Leader of one of the God Clans (a thunder god, his beard bristling with static electricity and small stormclouds trailing from his eyebrows) proposed a Station-wide policy that people of every kind Believed in something, whether they actually believed in anything or not, for a fixed amount of time every day on a rota. The net amount of Belief, he said, would be enough to power the existence of all the Mythic Entities on the Station, and thus increase the sum of sentient-lifeform happiness all round. The proposal was taken under advisement.

A Sloathe from Planet X – leader of a Clan made up almost entirely

of refugees from a multiverse which had collapsed in upon itself several years before – petitioned the Conclave for a consensus that hir Clan's territory be acknowledged as an independent sovereign state, and thus be exempt from all interclan rivalries and warfare for a fixed length of time, to help them get back on their multiple pseudopods...

And so on. And so forth. And through it all Volan Sled sat silently, a small thin smile playing across his lips in a way that made Mae An T'zhu for one uncomfortably aware of the pointed teeth lurking out of sight behind it. It was like constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop.

At long last the Moderator banged its gavel three times.

'Iff fere any uffer buffineff?' it said through its sand-funnel.

The words were merely a formality, rather like a motion to adjourn. The assembled Clan leaders shuffled around, generally rearranging things that had been disarranged and retrieving items dropped as they prepared to get up and leave... until the realisation dawned that Volan Sled was on his feet.

'As a matter of fact,' he said quite calmly, 'there is one more item of business.' He pulled a slightly incongruous-looking walkie-talkie unit from his suit and spoke into it. 'You can come in, now.'

There was a shimmering in the air, the feel of some building static charge, and then a series of concussive blasts as air was displaced at a speed faster than sound.

Standing in the Chamber, now, were a large number of bulky humanoids in black helmets and body-armour, each of them positively crawling with secondary weapons like knives, pistols and bandoliers of grenades. These were secondary because the most important items of weaponry were the heavy-gauge blaster rifles that each of them held, and now with cold efficiency proceeded to deploy and cover the startled Clan leaders.

There was something slightly wrong about these men, over and above the fact that they were in the process of threatening the Conclave of dignitaries – wrong in the context of the Station itself. There was something too sharp about them, too clear and distinct, as if they had come here from a reality that was, well, slightly more real than their surroundings. The effect was something like winning an abstract argument by punching someone in the face.

Standing in the midst of them was a viper-faced man in a razor-sharp black suit, who was looking about himself with blank contempt and hatred.

Volan Sled smiled, for the first time showing his teeth.

'Allow me to introduce Mr Lucien di Vasht. I believe he has a bone to pick with some of you.'

‘Is that it?’ Benny looked at the exterior of the Maze. From the outside it was nothing but a kind of shored-up shack three metres across, resting in a smallish and unkempt Station chamber that was basically the equivalent of waste ground. ‘That’s impossible.’

‘That’s the dimensionally-mutable nature of the Station,’

Jason said. ‘Things can contain other things bigger than themselves, a bit like onion skins but in a different direction. Things can be bigger on the inside than out.’

Indeed they could, she smiled to herself.

Then she pointed to the hole which Jason and his elven allies had blasted, which on this side seemed to be a few mere centimetres across. ‘And how in the name of the goddess did we get out through that?’

‘Just thank the gods you didn’t think that when you did, said Jason.

The Dragon Family soldiers were checking over their weapons while Suzi II was more or less just standing there, as if completely uncertain as to what to do. Benny had the idea that the ex-bodyguard was finding it hard to function as an individual, let alone an individual aware of the social niceties of life, without some kind of clearly-defined mission and objective – even if it was only that of pure survival.

The near-nakedness of Suzi II reminded Benny of her own somewhat dirty and dishevelled state. She rearranged her torn and dirty clothing. ‘I think we have to – mnf!’

She went ‘mnf!’ because, without warning, Jason had gathered her up in his arms and kissed her like he really meant it. For a moment Benny melted. It was as if, in that one instant, all the years of separation, all the barriers that had been built up over that time, had been simply wished away. And beneath it all there was the bond between them, a kind of golden thread that might be stretched, or tangled, or twisted out of shape, but that could never be broken. She relaxed herself against his hard and urgent body and clung to him, feeling herself plunge into the emotional equivalent of the way the stomach yawns when an orbital delivery device hits freefall or a roller coaster hits the top of the ramp. After all this time, after all the pain, he was back and nothing would...

‘Oh, no,’ she said, pushing him away slightly harder than she had intended, her heart giving a mortified little lurch at the sudden, utter hurt she saw in his eyes before he covered it up. ‘You don’t get off that easily.’

‘...’ Jason looked at her helplessly, in the manner of one trying to find the words for things that were literally too big and complicated to fit into them. ‘If you’re talking about, you know, well I wasn’t quite in my right mind for a while...’

‘Some would say that was an improvement,’ said Benny sourly.

She looked at the various emotions passing across his face in the tiny script of one trying desperately to hide them, and it was as if she had picked up a well-loved book and been instantly transported back through the years to when she had first read it. She could sympathise. She was, she realised, feeling many of those same emotions herself. She relented a little.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘These are things we have to talk about, and we will – but for the moment we simply don’t have the time. Volan Slead’s planning something big, it’s to do with this Conclave of Families everyone’s been going on about and we have to get in there.’

‘You’re right.’ Jason nodded, visibly purposeful once reminded of the importance of the matter. You’d have had to know him extremely well to catch his rather pathetic relief at putting certain other matters on hold. ‘How do we get past the armed guards of every single Clan in the Station?’

‘I’ll fight them!’ cut in Suzi II, who had started paying serious attention at the mention of Volan Slead. ‘I’ll fight them all and make him pay. I’ll...’

‘No you won’t,’ said Benny, kindly but with the edge to her voice of one giving an order. ‘We need you to do something very important. It’s vital that you do it, understand?’ She turned to Jason. ‘Where’s the di Vasht girl? Still at the Dragon people’s Enclave?’

‘Last I saw,’ said Jason. ‘Taking advantage of absolutely everything on offer while complaining about the service. The Dragon people are a bit like Bedouins; a guest is treated like a king or queen for a certain amount of time. I’d hate to see what happens to our little princess when that time runs out, though.’

‘I don’t think I’d hate it,’ Benny said. ‘I think I’d quite like to see it, actually.’

‘Well, you know what I mean,’ said Jason.

Benny turned to Suzi II again. ‘We need you to go to the Enclave of the Family of the Pontificating Dragon, pick up Mora di Vasht and bring her straight away to the Conclave of Families, yes?’

Suzi II visibly brightened.

‘Alive,’ Benny said hurriedly, noting the smile on the ex-bodyguard’s face. ‘We need her alive.’

Suzi II’s face fell a little. ‘Oh, all right.’

Privately, Benny was relieved that Suzi II had gone along with it. She had been counting on the fact that the ex-bodyguard would be grateful for any sense of concrete purpose, combined with the nascent sense of trust they had built between them while running the Maze. She was uncomfortably aware, though, that Suzi II was something of a ticking bomb; the slightest sense of some new betrayal could be the

straw that blew up the frog (no, that wasn't right... oh well) and turn the cybertron against her.

Jason talked with one of the elven soldiers, who then set off with Suzi II, escorting her to the Enclave. Benny noticed that the soldiers were treating her ex-husband with a certain degree of deference. Some large part of her hoped that this was a result of him being treated as an Honoured Guest as opposed to him having had some, umm, direct connection with Mae An T'zhu.

'I must admit that fighting our way in was the first thought that occurred to me,' said Jason, coming back to Benny after Suzi II had gone.

'With a bit of luck,' said Benny, 'there's not going to be any fighting at all. Come on. There's no telling what's going on in this Conclave of Families even as we speak.'

'This man's daughter,' said Volan Sled, 'came to our fair station expecting the courtesy and hospitality for which we are renowned...'

Several of the Clan leaders – those from worlds and species for whom an innate loathing of anything other than themselves, or those involved in some of the more particularly brutal Clan Vendettas – looked at him as if he were mad.

'...and what does she get?' Volan Sled continued, seemingly all oblivious. 'Why, within a matter of minutes she is abducted and no doubt used quite terribly, killed out of hand and dumped somewhere in a gutter.'

'Weren't us,' muttered the leader of a Gargoyle Clan, before lapsing into silence as one of Lucien di Vasht's soldiers aimed his weapon at it.

'Well, dumped somewhere inextricable in any case,' said Volan Sled. 'I have proof to hand of the direct involvement of the Clan of the Pontificating Dragon in this affair...'

Mae An T'zhu leapt to her feet. 'That is the foulest lie! I'll have you...'

A soldier shoved her back down into her seat. Hmm, he was quite strong and forceful, Mae thought. In other circumstances she'd have quite liked to meet him.

'As I was saying,' said Volan Sled, 'I have proof to hand of the Clan of the Pontificating Dragon being involved in this crime – but I also believe that almost every single one of you here is involved. For what purpose I cannot say, being not well versed in the depths of intrigue and machination to which some are capable of stooping...'

This time every single Clan leader in the room looked at him as if he had gone mad. Again, Sled affected not to notice.

'Alas,' he continued, 'I have no proof as to that. So I have invited Mr

di Vasht himself here, by way of the interdimensional teleportation known to his people, to get to the bottom of the matter. I would find it hard to believe that such a nefarious crime – a crime that goes against every tenet of the detente we have established here on Station Control – could have been countenanced by any but the very highest levels of any Clan. I would find it hard to believe that the matter would be dealt with, at least in part, by any other than the leader of any Clan involved. But how could such an involvement be proved...?

‘Fortunately, the bodies of Mr di Vasht’s people have what I believe is called a genome, which is built on the molecular structure of something called DAN – I beg your pardon, DNA – and this DNA is utterly distinctive to any individual. The people of Mr di Vasht have technologies which can detect and analyse what I understand they call a “particulate genetic trace”. I won’t pretend to understand what that means, technologically speaking, but the upshot is that if you are in the presence of one of Mr di Vasht’s people, you are exposed to particles of shed skin, perspiration and aspirated sputum that contain this DNA of theirs. It’s a quite repulsive idea, I completely agree, but in this case it may just prove useful.

‘Some of Mr di Vasht’s people will pass among you now, testing you for evidence of this “trace DNA”. I hasten to add that if it is not found you are by no means clear of suspicion – but if the test proves positive then it is absolutely certain that you have recently been in close proximity to Mora di Vasht – and thus are absolutely proven to have had a hand, as it were, in her abduction. Let us have a small demonstration, shall we?’

Volan Sleed turned to Lucien di Vasht, who nodded to one of the soldiers by his side. The soldier saluted, then walked across the room to Mae An T’zhu – his gait nothing like the stiffly formal marching of the parade ground, more the smooth loose prowling of a trooper in a combat zone. When he reached her, he pulled a small, boxy item from his tunic and ran it across Mae’s clothing in a brusque and not particularly pleasurable way. Readout lights flashed and the box emitted a high-pitched bleeping.

‘Of course,’ said Volan Sleed, ‘we already know that the good lady was involved. Now, if you will allow it, you will submit to the self same procedure.’

With a large number of blaster-rifles covering them, the Clan leaders had little choice. Several of Lucien di Vasht’s soldiers detached themselves from the main body and began the process of testing. Almost immediately a number of high-pitched bleeps were heard.

‘Why, Mr Moderator!’ Volan Sleed cheerfully exclaimed as the land-squid cast about itself in utter confusion. ‘How could you? And Mr Xloomi of the Three Small Toad Clan! I would never have expected

this! And Ms Lindi of the Sisters of Perpetual Night, I really would have considered you –

‘Watch your backs, mind your backs, important people coming through...’

The voice had come from the main doors of the Chamber. The soldiers of Lucien di Vasht did not glance round, save those whose duty it was to access any potential new threat and cover it, but all other eyes or applicable optical organs turned to watch the two figures entering the Conclave. One strode with supreme confidence as though completely unaware of the presence of large and nasty men with guns in the vicinity; the other was watchful, slightly less sure of himself.

‘Well, this is interesting,’ said Bernice Summerfield, looking confidently around herself. ‘Are these little get-togethers always like this?’

Outside the Conclave Chamber, in the midst of other guards from any number of species and Clans, Whorl and Sloater kept a careful watch. They had changed the nature of their bodies, as those of the Infernal species are capable of doing, thus avoiding any chance of being recognised by people such as Mae An T’zhu who had a personal vendetta against them.

Whorl was currently a burly, basically human figure with a ram’s skull instead of a head. The horns were excessively large, and while he had liked the idea of them at the time they were proving to be a bit of a problem in fitting through doors, but until he went through another complete body-change he was stuck with them. Sloater had opted for something simple: a protoplasmic blob of jet-black oily matter, from which a number of eyes burned like the evil of suns.

It had been Sloater and Whorl, in fact, who had searched Mae An T’zhu on her way into the Conclave, taking the opportunity to add some of the genetic matter Whorl himself had extracted from Mora di Vasht when he had rendered her unconscious with a hypodermic. Since the Dragon people’s leader had actually been in contact with Mora di Vasht – so Volan Sleed had told them – this was not precisely necessary, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

There were, they knew, other Iron Sun minions stationed at all the access points to the Conclave, each of them there with the job of introducing as much di Vasht genetic material to as many leaders as they could and to keep watch – watching for something rather different and wholly more specific than the general purpose of simply keeping out intruders.

‘Do you reckon we should have stopped those humans going through?’ Sloater asked. He was still smoking his ubiquitous roll-up, the heat from it sending little ripples of fire across his oily surface. ‘I

mean, they're only human, but they might be able to make trouble...'

'Our Lord can handle it,' said Whorl, shifting his horns into a slightly more comfortable position. 'Besides, they had a valid reason to pass – and what could we do with all the other guards watching? We sit tight. Our job is to make absolutely sure that one certain person doesn't get inside...'

'You dare to invade the sacred spaces of the Conclave?' With the Moderator under confused constraint by a pair of di Vasht's soldiers, Volan Sleed seemed to have assumed control of the meeting. 'You should know that only the leaders of a Clan have any right to be here...'

In the face of any number of armed and body-armoured intruders, this statement struck Benny as just plain ludicrous, but she gave him an answer anyway:

'We have a perfect right to be here,' she said. 'As the only two humans on the Station who come from... wherever it is we come from, we've formed our own Clan. We're the leaders of the, uh, Tribe of the Oscillating Wombat.'

'The two of you?' asked Volan Sleed.

'The two of us. The people of our species, I'll have you know, count the genders as a perfect duality, utterly equal and equipoised in all noble things.'

'Yeah,' said Jason, 'we...'

'Shut up Jason. As I was saying, we lead, jointly, all the people of our multiversal species here – and the fact that they consist of just the two of us is neither here nor there. We have, I repeat, a perfect right to be here.'

'She's right, you know,' said the leader of a Vampire Clan, pointing to a pair of seats which had quietly appeared beside his own.

'Thank you,' said Benny. 'I'd say something about taking you out for a bite later to show my gratitude, if I didn't have at least some vestige of a sense of humour.' She turned slowly to take in the assembled Clan leaders. 'So, as a duly acknowledged member of the Conclave of Families, I demand the right to make my Maiden Speech – and you can stop that sniggering right now, Jason Kane.'

'Much of what you say may be true,' said Volan Sleed, recovering his equilibrium masterfully, 'but you miss the fact that the Conclave is in session. Your voice shall not be heard.'

'I thought I was speaking quite clearly,' said Benny.

'You know very well what I mean,' said Volan Sleed. 'Your comments shall be stricken from the record and not affect the proceedings in any way. It's a part of the basic consensus which allows the Conclave to exist.'

‘I’d say the consensus has already been broken,’ said Benny, gesturing to the armed troops, who having had no orders to the contrary were still covering the Clan leaders in a holding pattern. ‘Besides, I don’t want to talk to the Conclave as such, I want to talk to you.’

This last was directed at the cold-faced man whom, Benny surmised, was their Master, Lucien di Vasht. Thus far, and in fact since his arrival in the Conclave Chamber in the first place, the warlord had not said a word, merely following events with the impenetrable, flint-hard gaze of one to whom those he was looking at were simply not worth the bother of speaking. Now he turned that gaze upon Benny.

He remained silent but at least, she thought, he was paying attention.

‘When I investigated the kidnapping,’ she said, ‘I found it a little off that nobody else seemed to know of or care about it – and even odder that the cover-up of the true perpetrator was so flimsy and ramshackle that it couldn’t help but collapse and reveal the truth behind it. Then I realised that the cover-up was merely an afterthought, so far as I was concerned, because I simply didn’t matter. I was simply a complication to be given something to do and be kept out of the way.

‘The true cover-up was aimed at you, di Vasht. The abduction of your daughter was arranged simply to bring you here and have you do what you’re doing now.’

Lucien di Vasht merely looked at her. Then he looked towards Volan Sled. There was absolutely no indication in his expression of what his thoughts might be.

‘Nonsense!’ Sled exclaimed, his composure remaining completely and utterly crack-free. ‘If those were the facts of the case – if we were to assume such a thing purely for the sake of argument – then what possible purpose could it serve that might outweigh the risk of being found out? To get my hands on the teleportation technologies of Mr di Vasht’s people that it is well known I covet?’ His gesture took in the troops in much the same way that Benny’s had done. ‘As you can see, the good Mr di Vasht has brought in his own men to break the security of the Conclave rather than entrust so much as a single device of that nature to myself.’

‘That was my first thought, I’ll admit,’ said Benny, ‘but then I realised that I was thinking in the wrong terms. You’re a demon, Sled. You’re effectively immortal. What possible consequences would there be for you if your scheming were discovered?

‘This is all a game to you, it’s as simple as that, and you play it by thinking at least three or four moves ahead. It’s like that Maze of yours: you’re playing with people and you just don’t care whether they live or die. You did all this, put people through all this, purely on

the off-chance that di Vasht would wipe out a bunch of rival Clan leaders, plunging the Clans into chaos and allowing you to consolidate your own hold on power just that little bit more. And plus it strengthens your ties with di Vasht, whether his ghastly little brat of a daughter is ever found alive or not, increasing your chances for his help in – I don't know – plans for incursions into other multiverses, or whatever, some time down the line. That's all the point you ever had, Sled. You're treating living, breathing people as though they're game-pieces on a board and it has to stop.'

Volan Sled smiled at her, his entire manner suggesting nothing but the kind of patronising concern one shows to the sort of ageing aunt who has suddenly declared that she's the Admiral Nelson and that everyone should be about battenning down the hatches.

'An interesting hypothesis,' he allowed, 'save for the unfortunate fact that there is not a single iota of truth in it. These are plainly the desperate ravings of one under suspicion. Indeed, I recall, Ms Summerfield, that I have already told you about the *proof* of your own involvement in the abduction – and are now trying to exonerate yourself. If, however, you do have any evidence that might be pertinent to your allegations then please, I implore you, present it. Otherwise – again, as I believe I've mentioned to you before – it will be a question of one word against another, and your word alone simply won't stand up.'

'You want proof?' Benny said. 'Well, now, let me see, how about the testimony of Mora di Vasht herself? Will that serve as proof?'

Volan Sled spread his large and somewhat clawlike hands expansively. 'By all means! That would be just – as I understand you people have the phrase – the ticket! Do present a living, breathing Mora di Vasht. Now.'

Real life, such as it is, does not present itself in the dramatic way of fiction. When one sees a man get shot on a holovid action-adventure show, for example, the event occurs in a language which the viewer can instantly read as dramatically correct. The main villain of the piece, for example, will be on the point of achieving his ultimate victory – and then an exit-wound will suddenly appear in his forehead, he will look puzzled for a moment, mutter something of the nature of

'But... why...?' and then fall over. Likewise, the monstrously strong and unstoppable right-hand-man of said villain will appear to have been killed in the penultimate set-piece and then, despite all physical possibility, will rise up to leap on the hero just in time to be summarily dispatched in the coda.

The sidekick with a cloud of doom hanging over him will die in

some gratuitously obdurate manner just when the hero needs some motivation to go on a killing-spree of his own. The disposable second-string love-interest will be found just in time for the hero to pick her up and lug her through the rain while shouting up into it. An entire family will end up lying decoratively around the hero's home so he can walk in, see them and start the whole sorry business off in the first place.

Real life, such as it is, simply does not work like that. The Saturday Night Special a New York mugger is threatening you with goes off by accident due to a faulty safety-catch, blowing away your lower jaw and leaving you to stumble into an Emergency Room where transfusions occur to save you for the years of reconstructive surgery and a career as the plucky star of popular documentaries with titles like *When Holidays go Wrong*. A campus-sniper blows the renal system out of the girl you've just plucked up the courage to ask out on a date after Anthropology 1.0.1, and you still keep going through your carefully-rehearsed speech for a few seconds before you realise she's gone and that people seem to be running around and screaming. A .45-calibre bullet hits you in the shoulder and, rather than leaving a neat little hole, blows your entire arm off in a stringy, bloody mess.

We dramatise such things way after the fact, convert them into a language we can understand, for the simple reason that it's the only way to cope with the sheer cold senselessness that is life – and indeed death. Life does not conform to a dramatic structure, however much we might wish it would. There are no cliffhangers, no sudden reprieves, and things never, ever turn up at the precise time when every dramatic convention means that they should.

All of which is mentioned because the events that occurred directly after Volan Slead said the word 'now' should not and could not have happened under any truly reasonable circumstances. But sometimes such things do, if only by the law of averages...

'Do present a living, breathing Mora di Vasht,' said Volan Slead. 'Now.'

A door of the Chamber burst open, bursting off its hinges to hang crumpled, and a pale and possibly human-looking streak shot through it faster than any normal human could, closely followed by armed guards from various Clans who were trying ineffectually to stop her. One or two of them had a grip on her and were being actually dragged along.

Trailing slightly behind came an elven guard – the same one, Benny saw, that had been detached to escort Suzi II to the Dragon people's Enclave. He was clutching his mutable weapon, now in the form of a sword, and seemed at a bit of a loss.

Suzi II unceremoniously dumped the bulky mass she had over one shoulder on to the floor. It turned out to be something human-shaped in a burlap sack, from within which came struggling and the sound of muffled cursing.

‘You only said she had to be alive,’ Suzi II said bluntly, glancing to Benny, then turning back to knock seven bells out of the guards who were impeding her in a flurry of kicks, roundhouse swipes and rabbit-punches that took no more than seconds and left figures of various species scattered unconscious around her.

Lucien di Vasht, meanwhile, was staring at the strenuously flopping sack. He nudged one of his men, who hurried over to it and, after a little fumbling at the drawstring with armour-gauntleted hands, finally unearthed a decidedly dishevelled and battered-looking Mora di Vasht.

‘Get away from me!’ she shrieked, slapping at the startled soldier with the frantic but ultimately ineffectual ferocity of a child, obviously not recognising him as one of her father’s men. ‘When my father hears of this, you’ll learn what pain and suffering means! I’ll have the skin whipped from your back and...’

‘You will stop that this instant, young lady!’

All eyes (and applicable etc.) turned to Lucien di Vasht. It was the first time he had spoken, and his voice was such as to make the very firmament tremble. It was the voice of every father at the end of his tether and not unlike the voice of some particularly bad-tempered god. One or two leaders of the various deity-based Clans made some surreptitious notes.

Mora di Vasht stopped in mid-flow. ‘Daddy...?’

A look passed across her face, a kind of cross between trepidation, outright fear and awe. it certainly wasn’t joy.

She climbed shakily to her feet, helped by the soldier who, when he touched her, touched her in the uncertain manner of one handling some substance that might explode at any minute.

‘You come over here, Mora di Vasht,’ her father growled in a voice like an approaching storm. (The Thunder God who had made a proposal for the Station-wide extension of Belief made a particular note.) ‘Do you have any idea of the worry you’ve put us through? Your mother – the jewel that lights my life, her with the eyes like jet, a mouth of cinnamon and the number 47 stamped on her back – has been inconsolable! She’s been punishing the slaves left, right and centre – and do you have any idea how hard it is to be continually replacing good slaves? Come over here, you wretched girl, now!’

‘Yes, Daddy.’ Meekly, said wretched girl crept over to her father and stood before him, shuffling her feet and looking shamefacedly at them. ‘Sorry, Daddy.’

‘Well, now you see,’ said Volan Sled without missing a beat, ‘how this human woman –’ he gestured toward Benny – ‘has conspired to implicate me in her own infamous plot. I believe that, when questioned, the girl will tell you that she has never seen me before in her life. The human woman had doubtless instigated the whole thing from the start with the intention of...’

‘...’ Benny said. The sheer audacity of Sled had left her speechless. The man – the demon, she reminded herself – would try to slide out from under a twenty-ton rock three weeks after it had squashed him flat. She tried to find the words to reply but failed – it was as if the sheer size of the lie obliterated all argument to it. But if she couldn’t find one, and find it soon, they were all of them going to end up peremptorily dead at the hand of an angry Lucien di Vasht.

The warlord, however, Benny saw, was looking between her and Volan Sled, his face completely neutral. There was no suspicion or trust, no animosity or respect, it was as if he were looking at the antics of some lower order of creatures in which he had no interest whatsoever. He simply didn’t care.

As Volan Sled launched into some fresh elaboration of supposed Benny-related scheming, di Vasht simply held up his hand to silence him. Sled caught the expression on his face and, for once, the demon seemed to lose his poise a little. He faltered into silence.

‘I have no opinion on the matter,’ di Vasht said simply.

‘And it is, frankly, not worth the bother of forming one. My daughter is returned, and seems not to have been particularly harmed by this rash excursion of hers. That is enough for me to let you live.’ His meaning seemed to encompass the Conclave Chamber and all those therein, Station Control itself and several entire multiverses to either side.

Lucien di Vasht then turned to Volan Sled. ‘You re dead to me now, Iron Sun. If our paths ever cross again, if you speak one word to me, there will be no quarter given.’

Volan Sled smiled a little uncertainly, then opened his mouth to...

‘If you speak one more word!’ di Vasht bellowed, his face instantly contorting into something that, though not out of the bounds of human possibility, seemed so inhumanly ferocious as to have even a demon sleeping with the lights on for the rest of his life. Volan Sled closed his mouth with an audible clash of pointed teeth made from something quite other than calcium.

Lucien di Vasht turned his attention to Benny. ‘You – and that man who appears to be trying to hide himself behind you – strike me as a reasonably intelligent and honourable woman. If you ever find yourself in my world, I think I’ll have you taken to my Seraglio rather than kill you out of hand.’

Despite the knife-edge nature of the situation, Benny bridled. 'Is that supposed to be some kind of compliment?'

'It's the only one you'll get,' replied di Vasht.

Benny had an idea that she could detect something other than sheer blanket contempt in his eyes, something akin to humour, as though di Vasht were enjoying, somewhere very deep inside himself, a joke at the expense of everybody here.

She found herself wondering just how much of what she'd heard about the nastiness of di Vasht and his world was really true. Of course, this was an hypothesis she was in no hurry to actually test.

Lucien di Vasht at last turned to Suzi II. 'You. Come. We are leaving.'

There was no hint of recrimination or potential punishment in his tone, any more than one might blame some item of electronic equipment that gives you an electrical shock before it's fixed. All the same, Suzi II stood her ground and held his gaze, a snarl of hatred on her lips.

She was almost completely naked now, adorned with mere strips of cloth which had somehow survived the most recent fighting. Her bearing, however, spoke of the fact that so far as she was concerned she was covered from head to toe in high-impact armour, and possibly clutching a flaming sword into the bargain.

'I'll not come with you,' she said. 'I'll kill you if you try to make me. Do you think I can't?'

'That may be debatable,' said di Vasht. He waved his hand, dismissing her completely from his consideration. 'Stay, then. It makes no difference to me.' He regarded his humbled daughter for a moment, then took her unprotesting hand and nodded to one of his lieutenants, who in turn sent that wordless command in a ripple through his Master's troops.

Without any further ceremony, with the multiple smack of air particles rushing to collide in the pockets of vacuum they left behind them, di Vasht, his daughter and his men simply vanished.

8 Head of the Family

‘Well,’ said Volan Sled in the stunned silence that followed the departure of di Vasht. That was a quite exhilarating interlude and no mistake.’ If he had any reaction whatsoever to the sudden and complete collapse of all his plans, he gave no sign. He clapped his hands together and nodded cheerfully to the still confused-looking land-squid with the gavel. ‘I really do think our business is concluded now, Mr Moderator – and I’d remind all here that what has just transpired was not official business of the Conclave. Certain things were done and said, I’ll quite happily admit, but by long tradition no repercussions can be visited upon my good self without, as it were, a head start. So , Mr Moderator, if you’ll...’

‘I’ll kill you, Sled. I’ll kill you now.’

The voice had come from Suzi II, who was staring at Sled’s neck with an intensity that had the Vampire Clan leader borrowing a page out of the Thunder God’s note pad.

The ex-bodyguard was trembling, a kind of high-tension vibration that was not entirely human. It was actually possible to hear the whine of the power as it coursed through her cybertronic implantation.

‘My dear lady!’ exclaimed Sled. ‘You cannot surely still be holding a grudge against *me*? Your sojourn in the Maze, it seems, has left no mark on you, after all, save for a rather fetching state of decolletage.’ He smiled rather condescendingly. ‘Come now, if there is any way for me to make it up to you, please tell me straight away.’

‘Oh, there’s a way,’ said Suzi II, and sprang.

‘No!’ Jason cried in some alarm as the pale blur of Suzi II leapt for Volan Sled.

‘What?’ said Benny. With all that had been going on, she had only been dimly aware of Jason by her side, in much the same way that one does not consciously think about a sleeping partner, while asleep, until one realises that he or she has gone and one side of the bed is getting cold.

‘She can’t do that!’ Jason was frantic. He started running forward. Bernice didn’t think much about it at the time, but later realised that getting between an enraged cybertron and her target would have been like getting between a steam-hammer and whatever it was pounding. Given her opinion on the intrinsic courage and fortitude of Jason, this meant that the situation must have been very dire indeed to have him trying to prevent it, as opposed to simply turning tail and running away from it.

In any event, it was far too late. Suzi II had reached Volan Sled and borne him to the ground before he could properly react. Kneeling over him, legs astride his chest, she snarled into his face. 'Now, you pay.'

Like twin striking cobras, her hands shot to Sled's face, punched two sets of hooked fingers into his eyes to gain some purchase and then, with superhuman strength, pulled his head clean from his body. Well not clean, precisely, but to over dwell upon cascading gouts of ichor and ragged strings of demon-flesh would not be commensurate with a published work suitable for all the family.

Jason skidded to a halt. It was as though he had smacked face-first into some invisible wall. Then, quite slowly, he began to back away.

'Oh shit,' he breathed. 'She's done it now...'

'What?' Benny said again. She really wished she didn't have to keep saying that, but there are certain situations in which it is the only thing one can possibly say.

Suzi II was now walking away from the body of Volan Sled, tossing the head absently back over her shoulder. The eyes of all the Clan leaders were on the body itself – aghast at this act of violence done to it in a space where, by long tradition, no such harm should come. Only Benny and Jason were watching as the head hit the floor and rolled a little way. Already it was shrivelling, desiccating, flaking away, it seemed, to nothing.

Now Benny turned her attention back to Sled's body, and saw what it was doing. 'Oh Goddess...'

As Suzi II walked victoriously toward them, some peripheral sixth sense made her falter and turn – or possibly she had just noticed the direction in which Benny's, Jason's and every other eye was turned.

The body of Volan Sled was shaking. It jerked and spasmed like a human undergoing cardiac arrest. And then, very slowly, it rose to its feet.

Something burst through the fabric of its suit over its left shoulder, just to one side of the ragged stump of Sled's neck. For a moment it seemed to be nothing more than a thick, fleshy snake more than three metres long, but as it thrashed about itself, squealing in an inhuman and crippled way that chilled the guts, a bulbous head formed on the end of it, a metre across, like a balloon explosively inflating from a gas canister.

There was a sound like tearing silk as eye holes and mouth formed. The eyes burned with a white-hot intensity. The mouth yawned open and teeth like sabres extended with a clash...

Suzi II stared at the monstrous thing as though rooted to the spot. It was as if her still quite simplified thought-processes and reactions simply could not cope with the fact that something she had quite definitively killed had come alive again, and had shut her down in a

manner similar to a computer crash.

No such luck for Benny. 'What's happening?' she shouted.

'What's happening?' Jason said beside her, gloomily looking up at the half-formed gargantuan head. 'Trouble. That's what's happening.'

Mae An T'zhu stared up at the monstrous head in alarm.

Given the general proclivities of her elven heritage, it will come as no surprise to the reader that, initially, she had found the initial stages of its genesis quite amusing – b u t j that point was long since past.

'FREE!' the thing shrieked from its malformed, yawning maw. FREE AT LAST! OH HOW I HAVE LONGED FOR THIS DAY! TRAPPED AND SUBJUGATED! PUT AWAY AND FORGOTTEN! AND NOW I AM FREE AND I SHALL FEED!'

The Clan leaders on either side of what had once been Volan Sled were making a bolt for it, hampered by the small fact that, as is so often the case, they had all simultaneously attempted to bolt in different directions and had become tangled up with each other. The massive head of the thing that had once been Volan Sled shot towards one of them on its extensible, impossibly long neck. Its jaws closed over him and he was lifted bodily off his feet. The leader was from one of the Animorph Clans and looked a little like a bipedal pig.

He squealed frantically as the head of what had once been Volan Sled jerked upwards and swallowed him whole into its gullet like a python swallowing a rat.

The resulting lump struggled visibly for a small while. The muscles of the neck flexed, there was the sound of crunching bones and then the lump vanished in a way suggesting that the crushed remains of what had caused it were heading rapidly for a stomach.

'LITTLE PIGGY,' said the thing that had once been Volan Sled, flapping lips like slack rubber tarpaulins over its teeth in the way that a human might smack his or her lips.

The thing that had been Volan Sled now cast its head around slowly, taking in the Chamber and its now uniformly panicked inhabitants. Looking for something. Looking for something specific. The misshapen face passed very close to Mae An T'zhu and she felt a crawling, icy fear as its burning eyes contemplated her. For long, long seconds those eyes rested upon her, then the head nodded to itself, swinging up and down on the end of the neck as though it were on a ball-hinge, as it evidently decided to save her for later. It cast around again, its lambent gaze tracking through the Chamber... until at last it came to rest again. With a start of genuine concern, Mae saw that it was gazing directly upon the human male she had grown quite fond of a scant few hours previously. Then his female friend, who was standing beside him, began to slowly move off to one side and Mae

saw that the head was actually following her.

Oh well, that was all right then for the moment.

‘YOU!’ the thing that had once been Volan Slead roared. ‘IT WAS YOU!’

Benny looked into its mad, burning eyes and really hoped that she wouldn’t get hit by a bus in the immediate future.

The state of her underwear at the moment would have her dying of shame. Think of something, she told herself, think of anything. Nothing, however, seemed to occur no matter how hard she wracked her brain.

Off to one side, she noticed out of the corner of her eye, Jason was quietly getting out of the way. Typical. Save your own skin, Jason Kane. If I forget anything else about you, I’ll always remember that. Of course, the amount of time I’m going to have to remember that in isn’t going to be long...

As ever – at least, as a distressing tendency she had noticed in herself – when her head displayed a lack of being smart, her mouth became instantly so:

‘Are you sure you’ve got the right girl?’ she said brightly to the thing that had once been Volan Slead. ‘I’m sure it wasn’t me. I’d remember if it was me, whatever it was.’

‘IT WAS... YOU.’ The volume, Benny noticed, seemed to be a kind of default setting, rather than denoting any kind of anger or rage. The thing that had once been Volan Slead was probably, by its own rights, speaking quietly. It was just doing it very, very loudly. ‘IT WAS YOU WHO FOILED THE SCHEMES OF SLEED. LAID THE WAY OPEN FOR MY COMING. MY RETURN.’

‘What, really?’ said Benny, trying not to babble as the possibility of light flickered at the end of the tunnel. ‘Well if that’s the case then I’d imagine you’ll be really grateful. Letting me go and all that. Possibly with a little present?’

‘I AM... GRATEFUL. YOU ARE INDEED A BRAVE AND MOST CLEVER HUMAN. IN FACT I THINK I SHALL INCORPORATE THOSE QUALITIES OF YOU WITHIN ME, ADD YOUR DISTINCTIVENESS TO MY OWN...’

‘Oh, come on,’ Benny said indignantly. ‘That’s hardly fair.’

And it also probably infringes on any number of registered trademar-‘

She got no further. The monstrous head of the thing that had once been Volan Slead filled her entire vision as it lunged for her.

There was a scream from one side, sounding more like an animal in snare-caught agony than human. Something barrelled into Benny, knocking her down hard. The foot-long, metallic teeth of the thing

that had once been Volan Slead closed on thin air.

There was a moment of utter shock and confusion before Benny recovered enough to roll over so that she could see what was going on – knowing with an utter terror that she was going to see it with absolute clarity and incredibly briefly before the world simply switched itself off.

What she saw, she would carry with her to the grave, constantly pulling it out and replaying it, turning it over and over in her mind, picking it to pieces and reassembling it, unable to quite believe the cold hard truth of it.

She saw Jason. In one hand he held the mutable amalgam of sword and gun that she had last seen in the possession of the elven guard who had accompanied Suzi II. He was diving under the head of the thing that had once been Volan Slead as its snapping jaws missed him by a matter of microns. The monstrous face smacked into the floor of the Conclave Chamber and stayed there for a moment, apparently slightly stunned.

And in a fluid movement, Jason came to his feet in a kind of rolling bounce. His face set in a rictus of insane rage, he swung the weapon round in a bludgeoning arc, its form shifting into something like a cross between a scimitar and a chainsaw, and severed the fleshy neck of the thing that had once been Volan Slead. If one didn't know better, Benny thought, and didn't know *him*, one could quite easily have mistaken sheer terror and desperation for the act of the Most Parfit and Most Noble Knight who had ever slain a dragon.

'Are you all right?' Jason asked, helping her to her feet. For a moment his grip was like iron and he really did seem like a tower of strength... and then he slumped a little and started looking around himself uncertainly. 'Do you know, I don't feel...'

He doubled over and heaved the contents of his stomach on to the already shrivelling remains of the severed head.

Benny put her arm across his shoulders, feeling obscurely that in a way quite unconnected with physical possibility, that was the only way to hold him up. After a while he shook her off and hauled himself upright again. That was the word, hauling, as if he were coldly taking up some inner strain.

'Blimey,' he said. 'I really don't want to go through that again.'

Benny looked around herself. Some of the guards which Suzi II had rendered unconscious were stirring awake. She realised, startled, that the events that had taken place since Suzi H's dramatically apposite entrance could be reckoned in the order of minutes. The ex-bodyguard herself was still standing there, looking about herself with an air of bemusement – recovering from her systems-crash at seeing the dead

walking but still a little confused. The assembled Clan leaders were no longer panicking, but seemed in a state of dumb shock every bit as marked as that of Suzi II.

The exception, of course, was Mae An T'zhu, who had appeared by Jason's side as though teleported by one of Lucien di Vasht's devices, and who now proceeded to smother him with kisses. Benny tried to remind herself that the elven woman came from an entirely different social structure and that so far as the elven were concerned there was nothing salacious, as such, about it at all. In this, she spectacularly failed.

'When you've quite finished,' she said coldly, as Jason disengaged himself from Mae's tongue and politely moved her hand to somewhere slightly less personal, 'you can possibly get around to telling me what happened here with...' she gestured towards the twice-killed body of Volan Sleed and her voice trailed off.

The body was shaking, jerking and spasming. The other Clan leaders, who had been edging forward to get a better look at it, were once again in full panic-mode, dashing in every direction at once and getting tangled up with each other again before so much as one of them made it to the Conclave Chamber doors.

'Oh no...' Benny said in a hollow voice. 'Here we go again.'

'Don't worry about it,' said Jason, seemingly completely unconcerned and causing Benny to stare with flat astonishment at him. 'I don't think it'll be a problem.'

The body climbed to its feet. Another head appeared like a balloon inflating under pressure from a gas canister. It was a demonic head and it resembled Volan Sleed – but in the same way that a human is a primate and resembles a chimpanzee.

'My word!' this new head exclaimed, flashing discreetly pointed teeth in a delighted smile. 'That was a bit disconcerting if I say so myself.' He looked about himself and the delight in his face increased several fold. 'Jason! My dear chap! How have things, uh, been?' He became serious. 'I do hope my, ah... well, I just hope I haven't been causing too much trouble.'

'Nothing we couldn't handle.' Jason himself seemed to be growing more cheerful by the second. 'Welcome back, boss.'

He realised that his ex-wife was still looking at him dumbfoundedly. 'I think you already know Mae An T'zhu, but this is Benny – I mean Professor Bernice Summerfield. I might have, uh, mentioned her once or twice.'

'Indeed you have.' The new arrival took Benny's hand and kissed it in the manner that if done wrong comes off as incredibly creepy, but if done right disarms you instantly and utterly with its sheer charm. 'Indeed you have. I'm honoured to make your acquaintance at long

last, Ms Summerfield. Agragazar Flatchlock at your service.'

9 Back and There Again

It was later. The five of them – Bernice, Jason, Suzi II, Mae An T’zhu and Agragazar Flatchlock himself – had retired to the gaming house of the Iron Sun Family after the Conclave had finally dissolved. Of course, in a certain sense there was seven of them. Jason explained:

‘Agragazar is what we call a trichoate,’ he said. ‘The demon equivalent of a multiple personality. It’s an evolutionary hangover from what was once a survival mechanism – cut off the head of one demon, another springs up to take its place and allow the original personality to heal.’

‘Quite so,’ said Flatchlock from the chair which had once been occupied by the alternative demon known as Volan Sleed. ‘Though I have to admit that my... my siblings, I suppose, are not exactly the most civilised of men.’

‘I only wish I’d realised that when Sleed took over from you,’ said Jason.

‘My fault entirely,’ said Flatchlock, a little chagrined. ‘We sometimes forget that what is obvious to ourselves, something we know in the bones, isn’t quite so obvious to others.’

‘So what are your plans now?’ Benny asked. She had pretty much fallen for the innate charm-offensive of Flatchlock, but she was still more than a little distrustful. What if the only difference was that he was better at it than Sleed?

‘Well for one thing,’ Flatchlock said, indicating the images that flickered on the wallscreen, ‘a lot of this will have to go. That Maze affair, especially. I’m told by some that the demon races have no morality, and that may be so, but we do have ethics. The treatment of people in such a manner is unconscionable, plain and simple.’

He turned to Suzi II, who still had a slightly switched-off quality about her. She did not seem to be thinking or feeling anything either way as such, simply watching Flatchlock carefully and calculating what she might at some point do.

‘I cannot apologise enough for what you’ve been through,’ he told her. ‘Please, if there is anything I can do to make amends, I’ll be more than happy to.’

Volan Sleed had recently said almost the precise same thing to her, with distinctly violent results. Flatchlock’s air of genuine concern, however, seemed to touch her.

Something, some human quality came back into her eyes and Suzi II smiled. It wasn’t exactly friendly, but there was no sense of a mindless attack in waiting.

‘I’ll let you know what I decide,’ she said.

‘I’d ask him for the world if I were you,’ said Mae An T’zhu, looking the ex-bodyguard up and down speculatively. ‘And you’d probably get it, a fine strong girl like you. Tell me, have you decided on a Clan yet?’

‘On that subject,’ said Flatchlock, ‘I’ve been thinking. My sibling was always interested in such things, but quite frankly it’s not my kind of thing at all. I have my own interests back in the Infernal Regions, and I’d hate to think of the state they’re in after so long an absence.’

‘Interests?’ said Benny. ‘What kind of interests, exactly?’

‘Aragazar runs a chain of travel agents,’ Jason told her.

Benny gave him a look and tried to work out if ‘travel agent’ was an euphemism for a particularly nasty form of demonic endeavour.

‘No, really,’ said Jason. ‘It’s a nice little earner.’

‘All in all,’ said Flatchlock, returning the conversation to more or less the point. ‘I think it might be wise for me to renounce my title here on Station Control.’ He turned to Mae An T’zhu. ‘Tell me, lady, how would you feel about our two Clans merging, with you as the head?’

The leader of the Dragon people suddenly became very businesslike. ‘It sounds perfectly fine to me,’ she said, ‘but how am I expected to reign over a proliferation of demons, with demonic powers?’

‘I shall, of course, turn over to you all the technologies controlled by the Iron Sun Family,’ said Flatchlock.

‘Technologies?’ said Benny. The idea sounded a little incongruous to her.

‘Why of course, Professor.’ Aragazar Flatchlock smiled with quiet amusement. ‘How on – Earth, I believe isn’t it? – do you think we of the Infernal Regions obtain our powers? Magic?’

‘If I’m to assume control of the Family of the Iron Sun,’ said Mae thoughtfully, ‘there is one thing I must insist upon. Two of your – two of Slead’s minions are an offence to me. Before we proceed further, I’ll want them punished. Take them with you to your Infernal Regions and do so. I want proof – real proof, mark you.’

‘That might be arranged,’ said Flatchlock solemnly. ‘The Infernal Regions have, as I say, quite a well developed ethical sense. The procedures are in place for that in a way quite different from that of what is, after all, the lawless outpost of Station Control.’

Flatchlock smiled. If he hadn’t been a demon, Benny thought, the expression would have been absolutely perfect for a righteous man contemplating the meting out of well-deserved justice.

‘Give me the details and I’ll have them brought into custody,’ he said. ‘I’d rather like to see their faces when they realise that times for the Family of the Iron Sun are about to change.’

It was later still when Benny and Jason arrived at what her mind still insisted on calling the Station Control 'spaceport.'

After the trials of the previous days, Bernice was utterly exhausted and for the moment was still in full fume.

Flatchlock had offered to take Jason with him when he went back to the Infernal Regions, and for some reason she had half expected her ex-husband to accept. Jason had declined, however, with thanks and the thanks had seemed entirely genuine. Infernal Contract or not, it seemed that he had honestly held his employer – his original employer – in high regard.

That wasn't, of course, the reason why Benny was fuming.

Jason had taken Mae An T'zhu into his private apartments in the gaming house to, so he said, pack his belongings and say goodbye simultaneously, thus saving valuable time. He had emerged some time later, Benny could not help noticing, with no luggage whatsoever, and some of the clothes he'd gone in wearing now suddenly worn backwards. If Mae had not, upon emerging herself, started demonstrating an extremely strong interest in Suzi II (Jason's leaving had broken her heart, she had said, but one must after all stop living in the past and move on) Benny wasn't sure that she would have been responsible for her actions.

Not, of course, that she had any intention of ever touching her ex-husband with a ten-foot pole ever again.

Outward-bound, the port had no form of customs and excise – what did the people of Station Control care what somebody took back to their own multiversal reality? Benny and Jason wandered through a space that if you looked at it one way was a rocket launch-site, or if you looked at it in another a forest of dirigible mooring-pylons, or a submarine pen, or a hangar for ghostly sunjammers, or a platform full of 'space machines' that called to mind the time machine of H.G. Wells, until they came to what – whichever way you looked at it – was a small prefabricated hut in which sat the broker to whom Benny had in effect pawned the Braxiatel Collection's probe ship when she had first arrived.

The broker – a kind of ambulatory suit over something invisible, rather like the soon to be permanently disincorporated Mr Whorl – rifled through the documentation in Benny's holdall, glanced at the promissory note that Agragazar Flatchlock had given her for being of no small help in returning himself, as it were, to himself, and had made the sort of sucking sound with his nonexistent teeth that tells people the entire universe over that something horrible in a commercial sense is going to happen.

'Didn't go for the no-breakage clause, see?' he said.

'And just what,' said Benny, with what she thought of as admirable

restraint, 'would the "no-breakage clause" have entailed?'

'Don't have to take that sort of tone with me,' said the affronted broker. 'Your own fault for not reading the fine print, see?' He pulled a sheaf of papers from the tottering pile on his desk and pored through them with rather more care, in fact with almost active reverence, than he had Benny's – they were his own papers after all, see?

'No-breakage clause means we don't take ship apart and sell bits of it for how long it's been left. And you don't have that.'

Benny and Jason looked at the remains of the probe ship.

Remains, of course, was probably not the precisely correct word. The ship was almost entirely complete, because Benny had been in Station Control for too short a time for many bits of it to have been sold off.

Complete, that is, only in a certain sense. The probe ship had been carefully dismantled, component by component, plate by plate, and left in a neat, tidy but above all completely dismantled pile.

'So what the hell are we going to do now?' said Jason, instantly earning himself the Summerfield Prize of an Exasperated Slap for Stating the Completely and Utterly Obvious. 'Ouch! That hurt! I mean how in the name of the various gods are we going to get back to our own reality now? Ow!'

The Enormous Space Octopus swam through the chaotic spaces that surrounded Station Control, heading for a derelict ship picked out with flashing warning beacons and from which a perfectly circular bite appeared to have been taken out of the hull.

In the gondola, the bearded implike captain of the Enormous Space Octopus regarded Bernice and Jason anxiously as they strapped themselves into pressure suits.

'Is absolutely sure you want do this?' it squeaked dubiously. 'Is know you give lotsa money, no questions ask me and thing, but is really serious and dangerous thing you want to do.'

Benny had been looking at the Enormous Space Octopus captain closely since they had left the Station.

'It's true isn't it?' she said. 'It's you again. You really are all the same imp-thing.'

'I is not!' the captain of the Enormous Space Octopus cried indignantly. 'I is very famous space-captain, me, and completely different other thing from any other imp! As can plainly see, have big, bushy and luxuriantly floppy beard!'

'You know I'd find it much easier to believe you,' said Benny, 'if I couldn't plainly see the loop of string holding it onto your head.'

The mass of the *Tinker's Cuss* was very close, now.

Scavengers from the Station had picked it over comprehensively, leaving not much more than a framework and the occasional plane of a deck. That wasn't important.

Benny hefted the backpack into which she had stowed half of the portable dimensional-field generators they had managed to salvage from the deconstructed pile of what had once been her probe ship. It was heavy, but hopefully not too heavy. She only hoped that they would be working in some equivalent of zero-gravity – though in the strange spaces around Station Control, it wouldn't be a good idea simply to assume that.

She strapped on the backpack. Jason did likewise with his own collection of generators. They headed for the gondola's hatch and made fast their safety lines. With any luck they'd be unnecessary and both Benny and Jason would be able to kick off from the Enormous Space Octopus in freefall. Of course, there was always the possibility that they'd end up hanging from the lines like a pair of pressure-suited fish.

Time had no real meaning here amongst the quasi-spatial energy swirls, but it felt as though they had been working for hours. Fortunately, Benny's fears of strange and erratic gravitational effects had proved unfounded. They had experienced the occasional, intangible tug at the pit of the stomach, the occasional touch of wooziness, but for the most part there had been no ill effects as they had clambered over the carcass of the *Tinker's Cuss*, lashing the field-generators to her skeletal frame.

At last, the final generator was in place. Benny looked around herself and up, pivoting her entire suited upper body to do so, to see that the Enormous Space Octopus was still floating nearby. She had naturally assumed that it would have headed back for the Station after dropping them off, but it seemed to have decided to hang around around in case they needed to be rescued. She raised a hand to wave it off, and the small figure of the imp-thing captain in the gondola window waved back at her frantically. She blatted her hands in a shoo-shoo gesture. Eventually the imp-thing got the point. The Enormous Space Octopus drifted away.

Benny got the impression, somehow, that it seemed slightly dejected.

'Last one done,' said Jason over the suit-to-suit commlink.

'What should I do now?'

'Strap yourself down tight,' Benny told him, unclipping a small control unit from the belt of her suit. 'I'm going to set the generators to reorientate the ship and match it up with the piece left in our multiverse. We'll get there, I suppose, but Goddess alone knows where

or what we'll go through on the way.'

'Okay.' There was a pause of maybe half a minute, then:

'Okay. I'm tied down tight.'

'Not for the first time in the last few days, I'll bet.' Benny powered up the control unit and started punching in co-ordinates.

She would never have a clear memory of the feelings that followed – feelings that the human body was never meant to experience and with which the human mind was ever meant to cope. Intellectually, she knew that she was merely rotating through the extradimensional axis that three-dimensional beings do all the time – the three dimensions plus Time that we know being only three-plus-Time of an infinite dimensional set – without even knowing it.

Only now she could feel it, deep inside, deep in the bone.

Spinning through a deprisensory gulf from which sporadic, fractured images flared too briefly to make even a partial sense – a black iron engine spinning through a burning sky, and the engine was herself, and there was something wrong, something dreadfully wrong with its internal workings, something festering and growing inside, and as she tried to comprehend its vast mass of churning cogs and gears she opened a mouth that was not a mouth and began to scream...

And then abruptly, with no more fuss than a switch being thrown, there was a star field beyond the visor of her helmet.

White pinpoint stars in dead black vacuum. They seemed constant, eternal. Perhaps most importantly, they didn't suddenly start jumping around and forming themselves into little pictures seemingly for the hell of it.

Benny sighed. In a life that had taken her to any number of strange places during the course of it, she had grown slightly wary of assuming that she would ever truly find her way home. But this seemed as good an approximation as any for the moment.

With the rest of the *Tinker's Cuss* now in some halfway congruent reality, the dimensional stresses around the bitten-out section of the science-deck – the lethal forces that Benny had noted when she had first arrived at these spatial co-ordinates – had dissipated. On the negative side, the bitten-out section of the science-deck was completely depressurised. Pressure suits of the twenty-fifth century were sufficiently advanced that the wearer could survive in them for days, but both Benny and Jason were uneasily aware that once the power and air did run out there would be no way to replenish them.

The cold pinhole stars of their own multiverse twinkled at them. Their lashed-together interdimensional trip had blown out a large number of the field-generators with which they had made it. There

was no way back. They hauled themselves through the science deck, checking over the surviving, dormant equipment with clumsy gauntleted hands.

‘Anything interesting?’ Jason asked as Benny pored over a collection of items breadboarded together in a manner that made even a lashed-together effort with field-generators seem like the acme of design.

‘It looks like the transmitter Gilhooly talked about,’ said Benny. ‘I think I can get it working again, but the power-cells are very low. It’ll pump out its recorded message for a while, but God only knows how long it’ll last.’

‘Worth a try though, anyway,’ said Jason, attempting to inject a note of cheeriness into his voice. ‘At least it gives us something to hope for, right?’

The precise location isn’t important. The instantaneous nature of star-jump technology means that stellar bodies are perceived in terms of known connections between them rather than in terms of physical distance, rather like the stations on the London Underground. So when the guidance systems of the commercial cargo transport *Barquentine* malfunctioned, flipping her out from subspace into physical space at random, all the crew could be really sure of was that they were Somewhere Off the Map.

All in all, it was fortunate that the *Barquentine* was a freighter, and that interstellar commerce works for the most part by direct barter. Cargo was valuable in and of itself, could not be written off as an insurance loss and so every possible effort is made to get it to its appointed destination.

The *Barquentine* was therefore packed with sensors and Galactic Positioning Systems. She hung in dead space, attempting to extrapolate her relative position from the visible star field, heavy-duty receivers tracking through spatial and subspatial spectra in the hope of picking up any transmission at all.

Thus it was that they picked up a weak radio-frequency loop, operating on the speed of light, that in the ordinary course of events wouldn’t have been picked up by anybody, ever. If the *Barquentine* hadn’t been packed with the kind of sensor-equipment that could pinpoint a specific snowflake in a whole weather-system of blizzards, this would have been a very short book indeed.

Actually, that’s not quite true. As should by now have become completely evident, it would have been a book lasting almost exactly up to this point, but with nothing much following on afterwards.

In a hold reserved for perishables on the *Barquentine*, on a makeshift bed made up from packing crates and sacking, Benny sat with her knees drawn up to her chin.

‘Have you given any thought to what you’re going to do now you’re back?’ she said. ‘Back in this multiverse, I mean, back in this reality.’

‘Do you know,’ said Jason, munching on a half-ripe oogli fruit, an act that would probably have him thrown directly into the brig, or possibly out of an airlock if the captain of the freighter got to hear about it, ‘I honestly never thought that far ahead. I mean, how long have I been away?’

Benny told him.

‘Ah,’ said Jason, a little crestfallen. ‘I might have one or two contacts left, but most of them were the sort of people who count you as dead if you drop out of sight for a week.’

‘What about money?’ Benny asked.

Jason spat out a pip. ‘Well, you know me. I was never much of a one for salting the stuff away. Up one day and down the next – and when I fell off the face of the world I was pretty far down. On my uppers, you might say.’ He frowned. ‘Have you ever noticed how two ways of saying something can mean exactly the same thing, but the words themselves seem to mean the exact opposite?’

‘Don’t change the subject,’ Benny said. ‘I just don’t like the idea of abandoning you somewhere. Things have changed since you went away. Changed quite a lot, in fact.’

Jason shrugged. ‘I’ll cope. I always do. How about you? What are your plans?’

‘The captain let me put an infraspacial call in to the Collection,’ Benny said. ‘Brax’ll have a ship waiting for me when the *Barquentine* makes planetfall.’ For a long moment she became pensive, then reached a decision.

‘Uh-oh,’ said Jason. ‘I know that look.’

‘What look?’ Benny said, startled from her thoughts.

‘The look that says some of the next words out of your mouth are going to be “regret”, “I’m” and “I know going to this”. I’ll be fine. Don’t do me any favours, all right?’

Benny found herself getting angry. That was the thing about Jason. No matter what you were feeling, or thinking, or thought you were feeling, he’d come out with something like that and have you wanting to box his ears off. (And come on, said a weaselly little voice in the back of her head, be honest, haven’t you been missing that just a little all these years? As though there’s a hole inside that you that can only be filled by a seriously good row?)

‘No there isn’t!’ Benny snapped.

‘Pardon?’ said Jason.

‘Nothing,’ Benny said. ‘I wasn’t talking to you.’

‘Well let me know when you are,’ said Jason, rummaging through a crate of punnets for another marginally edible fruit. ‘I’ll be all ears.’

They don't call me "Mr All Ears" for nothing. They think I don't know they call me that, but I do, on account of being all –'

Benny sighed. At least, she thought she had. Looking back on it, it had come out as a sort of unconscious, murderous growl that had made even Jason Peter Kane pause in mid-flow and look at her in askance.

'Listen to me,' she said. 'There's a lot of space going spare at the Collection. If you came back with me, I'm sure that Braxiatel would let you stay for a while, just until you get on your feet. I am not asking you to move in with me, so don't flatter yourself.'

Jason shrugged, completely unconcerned. This annoyed Benny a little; she'd put a lot of thought into telling him how he wouldn't be moving in with her and it was a little galling to see that he couldn't care less.

'That's the offer,' she said. 'Take it or leave it.'

Jason wagged his hand in a little see-saw gesture. 'Just till I'm back on my feet?'

Benny nodded, 'Just till you're back on your feet.'

'Well, okay. Just so long as I wouldn't be imposing. Just until I find a way of putting together some cash.'

To: Absolom Trantor, Xenosleazoid Productions, Proxima

Prom: Jason Kane, c/o The Braxiatel Collection

Hey, Sol, long time no hear from me!! I've just been knocking around, you know, doing this and that, and for a lot of the time Cue not had a proper contact address. That's changed for a while now, hopefully. If you wanna talk to me about this, you can get in touch via the Collection's central registry. Just don't go through Professor Bernice Summerfield, whatever you do.

Yeah, that's right, the old ball and chain is –

oh, hi, Benny. Nothing much. I'm just dictating a couple of notes...

Where was I? Oh, yes. Attached is a breakdown for something you might be able to use. I'm thinking pay-per-view myself, but if we go straight to wafer-recording then we might be able to get just that little bit more extreme, if you know what I mean. For contractual purposes, let me formally state that it's completely original, I made it up from start to finish and it contains no references to any real persons either living or dead. Honest. I'm thinking Lyndi Worn, incidentally, would be just perfect for the lead.

So anyway, give me a call. How is *Xenomorphie Bondage Slaves* doing? I gather from the 'net that it's become something of a cult classic while I've been away. How does that translate in real sales terms compared with, say, *Of men and Several mice*?

Anyhow. Talk to you later.

Jason

Enc.

THE KISS OF THE DRAGON WOMAN

A breakdown by Jason Kane

(Rider clause: note that as a peremptory condition of contract, no simskins, androids or simulacra of any kind are to be used in the production of this work, on the basis that simulacra can be manipulated to do anything no matter how physically impossible or repugnant. The author asserts his firm moral belief that a work of this nature must be performed with living human actors, with recognisably human emotions, or it simply doesn't mean anything.)

SUZI DEFAME wakes in her seedy quarters. She's a mercenary, hard as nails but drop-dead with it. She's not alone, and through the hangover she remembers some of what she did the night before. Use any old stock party-footage you have lying around through a blur-filter. Back in her quarters, she takes her casual pick-ups through a bit of the ole three-hand play – nice little slot here for a couple of, ahem, up-and-coming bit-parters here, maybe – before kicking them out, pulling on her clothes and heading out.

(This is all set on your standard deep space outpost transit-station, by the way. Lots of your basic alien chaos, criminal-underworld types, gang-bosses etc. Anyone you have hanging round on the lot, basically. If we really have to give it a name just call it Station Zero or something – I haven't forgotten how some bright spark went and called the setting for Bondage Slaves 'Outpost Uranus' and I don't wanna see that repeated ever again. There are limits.)

KATHERINE VASHANTE arrives on the Station. She's a spoilt-little-rich-girl type, on the run from Daddy, who's this big high-up in the criminal syndicates of Earth. (Are we allowed to use the real name of the Mob, here? These things come and go, I know.) She's here with her **MAID**, who she treats with utter contempt. In the quarters they're assigned they go through this whole mistress-and-servant humiliation scene before the maid springs a small surprise. She's working for the bad guys – you know, at this point just generic bad guys – and opens the door to two **THUGS** who take her captive. With Katherine immobilised, the maid advances on her with an evil smile. It's the whole now-the-tables-have-turned thing, yeah?

Meanwhile the local **MOB BOSS** gets a call to tell him how Katherine has been kidnapped. (Maybe we can get an out-of-work old character hack to do this since he isn't going to be directly involved with any of the mucky stuff. Is Munroe Hennessy still around?) An independent

gang called the Dragon Tribe are demanding a ransom for Katherine, who they've taken in revenge for the killing of the favourite husband of their leader, **MEI LING JONES**. (Maybe a flashback of Mei Ling and hubby on the job, here, before he's suddenly strangled or something from behind.) Since Katherine was supposed to be under the protection of the Boss, he's gonna be in one hell of a lot of trouble if he doesn't get her back.

Taking along **JALON 9** – his most trusted informer and a seriously funky-looking cyborg – the Boss goes to an illegal Sex Combat arena. (All right, already, I'm making the idea of 'Sex Combat' up of the top of my head. Use your imagination. It looks exactly like what it sounds like up to and including any amount of money you wanna blow on a big set-piece.) Suzi Defame is fighting here to eke out what she makes from mercenary-ing. And plus she really likes doing it, too. We watch her as she goes through an increasingly climactic series of 'fights'. Afterwards, the Boss and Jalon meet with her and she agrees to track down Katherine and her kidnappers.

Meanwhile, in a dungeon-like affair, Katherine wakes up. She's chained up amongst any number of interesting items of equipment (scope for quite a lot of Interactivity here, I think, on the wafer-recording cut) together with the Maid and thugs. She's going to be here for quite some while, says the maid, so now what can we do to pass the time...?

(Quick note here, Sol: you know perfectly well what I feel about people being forced to do things genuinely against their will – I picked you for stuff like this because I think you feel the same way, too. If the final product gives any indication of anything other than Katherine's true desires being unlocked – or at the very least, happily inept play-acting – I'm not only taking my name off it but certain very clever friends of mine are going to do stuff to your systems that'll blow your entire operation out of the water. You know I'm not lying.)

Meanwhile, Suzi and Jalon investigate, looking through the quarters where Katherine was abducted. Suzi really hates cyborgs, Jalon can't stand that sort of prejudice and so they're not exactly getting on like a house on fire. There's this huge sexual chemistry thing going on between them, though (we could have an intercut scene of them at it like weasels in their minds each time they accidentally touch each other, right?). The quarters are a bust, and Suzi says so.

(Second-unit FX stuff, if we have the budget: The mail-tube in Katherine's quarters is voice activated. When Suzi speaks near to the tube it triggers and delivers a bomb. The explosion tears out a wall. If we can't stretch to that, of course, they just decide to have it out with the kidnappers face-to-face.)

A scorched and bettered Suzi and Jalon (if we went the high-budget

way) burst into the private apartments of Mei Ling Jones. Mei Ling has guards on hand, however, and they are taken down hard, tied up and ‘interrogated’ by her. This of course devolves into the sort of situation where everybody loses the point of why they’re interrogating or being interrogated in the first place. Afterwards, Suzi accuses Mei Ling of the kidnapping. Mei Ling’s reaction is slightly different than expected – she knows nothing whatsoever about it and is utterly furious. Who has been spreading these lies about her?

Cut to the dungeon-like affair where the Maid prepares Katherine for the arrival of somebody very important. It is, of course, the local Mob Boss. He has engineered the kidnapping himself to place the blame on the Dragon Tribe and give himself an excuse to crush them all like bugs. (Bit of handwaving here obviously, but come on, nobody’s going to be watching this for the plot-points.) What with the last thing we wanna see being the raddled old character hack on the job, the Boss has Katherine – and in a bit of last-ditch double-crossing, the Maid, too – shackled into an Orgasmatron machine, which will slowly kill them with an accelerating series of... oh God, I’ve lost the will to live. Work it out for yourself.

Fortunately, our heroes (Suzi, Jalon and Mei Ling) burst through the door in time to free the victims. Standard bit of argie-bargie ending up with the Boss being shot by Suzi and good riddance. Suzi now promptly confesses that what with one thing and another, and what with everything they’ve been through, she now loves the little cotton socks off cyborgs. Jalon allows that he quite likes her, too. Love is in the air, one thing leads to another and before you can say knife, the entire cast list except the dead ones are, umm, celebrating the triumph once again of Good over Evil...

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Epilogue

It's funny how the stories of our lives work, Jason thought.

Those narratives we all of us carry around inside ourselves to shape the world and give it meaning, if only to ourselves, and how a single new element, just one small thing, can change them utterly. You think you're living in a happy and complicated, bed-hopping sex romp, then you learn that one of the people in it, all unknowing, has been Positive for the last ten years – and find that you've been living in another kind of story entirely. Or the nice quiet man you thought you'd have a nice quiet night in with turns out to be the sort of person that the neighbours subsequently describe as a 'nice quiet man', albeit with an unfortunate propensity for doing extraordinary things with powertools while the acid bath is running.

Or the prince you married in the Happy Ending makes it evident, after a while, that he has a tendency to knock seven bells out of people as a rightful punishment for the heinous crime of burning the toast. Or the woman you fell in love with, the girl you thought you knew, sticks her fist into your guts, and pulls them out, and hands them to you on a plate.

It's funny how these things work out. Ho ho bleeding ho.

The Braxiatel Collection had quite a surprising number of bars for what was basically an academic establishment – or rather, it had a surprising number of bars of the better sort, as opposed to the squalid and dispiriting drinking holes – accent on the holes, natch – that might have catered for a snakebite-drinking academic population. This happy state of affairs might have been a result of Brax himself deciding that if such establishments were going to exist here on the Collection, then they might as well be as salubrious as possible – but Jason reckoned he could detect some other hand at work here. Hmm. Now who could possibly decide that what a galactically-renowned Collection of archaeological artefacts really needed was bars, and lots of 'em?

Better not to think about it, on the whole. The whole point of him being here, in the bar, was specifically not to think of certain things – not to think about a certain someone – until the mindless hurt of it was well and truly cushioned.

Jason polished off the beer component of his boilermaker and started hunting, automatically, in his pockets for change – before remembering that he didn't need to. He had a line of credit on the Collection's systems, now, and there was still quite a bit to go before he dropped off the end of it. More than enough for a complete

ethanolic pillow-and-bedsread set.

The bar in question was called the Rat and Pestle: small, quiet and designed to approximate the snug of an Olde English pub. Jason was singularly allergic to hunting prints and horse-brasses in the general scheme of things, but he had chosen the place because of its relative seclusion. He was currently the only customer.

‘Gottle of geer, gleese,’ he said to the barman.

The barman, an animatronic simulacrum slaved to AI-routines in the Collection mainframe and looking like a cross between Bluff Mine Host and one of those laughing sailors you find in little boxes on piers, merely looked at him.

‘Just my little joke,’ said Jason, uncomfortably.

‘Ah, yes, sir,’ said the barman impassively. ‘And a very fine joke, too. I’ve never heard that joke before.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ Jason said. ‘I didn’t realise you were self-aware.’ He indicated the two glasses on the counter before him. ‘Another three of these, please.’

Several drinks later, he became aware of a new presence.

Someone else had entered the bar. A girl.

She was utterly, strikingly beautiful – and it wasn’t just the drink telling him that. Stone cold sober and swimming in a vat of coffee, she’d be beautiful. Her, that is, being beautiful, not swimming in a vat of coffee. Mind you, if she was – swimming in a vat of coffee, that is – she’d be probably wearing this perky little costume, or a clingy T-shirt, or quite possibly not a stitch...

‘Hello, there,’ she said, taking the stool beside him and signalling to the barman, who immediately produced a drink from under the bar and placed it before her. Non-alcoholic fruit juice, Jason thought dismally.

‘I, uh, haven’t seen you around before,’ the girl continued in a friendly manner. ‘What’s your name? What do you do?’

Jason decided to play it straight.

‘Kane,’ he said. ‘My name’s Jason Kane. I... well, I’m not quite sure what I do at the moment. I’ve been away for a while. I’m looking around at the moment, trying to get my bearings. I’ve been staying here on the Collection with – well, not with, if you get me – my ex these last few weeks. Benny Summerfield. Do you know her?’

‘Oh, Professor Summerfield,’ the girl exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. ‘Everybody knows Professor Summerfield. I think she’s just wonderful.’

Jason thought she was coming it a bit strong with the old hero-worship, to be quite honest. Come to think of it, was he the only person who remembered that the word

'professor' could have another meaning?

'Yeah, wonderful,' he said. 'She's really wonderful.'

He'd meant it as nothing more than sarcasm, almost completely neutral – but as it came out of his mouth he heard the sheer venom and hatred shaking in his voice. It alarmed him a bit. Did he really feel like that? Was that truly how he felt at the core?

The girl reacted to his tone as if stung. Then she looked at him worriedly, frightened – not frightened of being in the company of someone who might attack her, it seemed, but frightened for somebody who might suddenly be about slitting his wrists.

'Are you okay?' she said. 'Look, if you want to talk about it...'

The proper translation of that phrase was 'shut the hell up, misery-boy, shut up now and let the poor girl get away from you.' She was gazing at him frankly, though, with genuine concern, giving not the slightest indication of pulling away – and much against his better judgement Jason found himself talking about it:

'We were fine for a few weeks,' Jason said. 'You know, generally hanging around together and doing stuff, talking about stuff. I wasn't trying to get into her pants or anything – well, you know, not more than three times a minute – but there did seem to be something there for both of us. Things were mostly just friendly, you know, and I think we were both waiting for the right time and place without trying to force it. We were getting on – which was a wonder in itself, believe you me. Sometimes she'd get thoughtful, like her mind was somewhere else, but so did I, I suppose. We'd both been through a hell of a lot, these last few years, and it all took time to process.'

'And then tonight, it all seemed to just click. I went over to her rooms and she just grabbed me, dragged me inside and started climbing all over me. It was weird, a bit frightening, the intensity... I mean, come on, right, I've had my moments, but I tend not to be the target for that kind of uncontrollable lust, let alone from someone who's already seen me in my second-worst underwear.'

'And then it went... I don't know quite what happened. I can see it clear as daylight. We're in her rooms, she's got me up against the door and sort of ravening away at me, bursting several buttons trying to get my shirt off – then she looks down at God knows what, I don't know, the bloody cat flap or something, and suddenly she's punching at me, really hysterical and in tears. It just...'

'I try to get her to talk to me, tell me what's wrong... and that's when she drops the bombshell. She goes quiet, looks at me like she loathes me and drops the bombshell. She's pregnant, she says, all very calm and quiet, she's having a baby and it isn't mine, so shouldn't I just get out, now?'

Jason noticed that tears were streaking his face. He'd better watch himself, he thought, or he was going to end up diluting his beer.

'Why did she do it?' he said, slightly annoyed at the little-boy-lost sound his own voice seemed to be making. 'I mean... I don't mean all the obviously Big stuff, but why didn't she give me so much as a bloody clue? Why did she have to tell me like that? Can she really, truly hate me all that much?'

The girl looked at him with a kind of pensive sorrow.

'I don't think so,' she said at last. 'I don't think it's about hate. I think it might be more complicated than that.'

'Complicated?' Jason all but spat the word. 'What's so frigging complicated about it?'

'Well, let's just suppose that for a while, over a few months, Professor Summerfield noticed a number of things happening to her body,' said the girl. 'She might have just put it down to her age or something, simply getting older, but I gather that she's already been older than she is now – what with one thing and another – and so she'd realise that what she was feeling was entirely different from that.'

'Now, suppose she started to half-suspect that she had an actual illness, a cancer or the like, kept putting off having it checked out in case those suspicions turned out to be right... and then somebody incredibly special to her came back into her life. Somebody she wanted to spend time with, in one way or another, possibly years of time. That might give her the impetus to finally bite the bullet and make sure she wasn't going to drop dead in a matter of months.'

'And so when the medic told her she was pregnant, she would have been utterly astounded. She knew for a fact that there had been no one at the time in question who could have... but oh yes, she might remember, oh yes there was. A few months before, she'd had been displaced from her body and... well, certain things happened to it while she was away.'

The girl frowned, as though working out some hard but interesting abstract puzzle.

'When all this hit her,' she continued, 'I think Professor Summerfield might have lost her mind a little, started operating purely on instinct. What she thought was that she needed to be held, to have the man she loved wrap her in his arms, to lose herself in physicality for a little while and put everything else on hold until she felt capable of dealing with it. And then, just at the crucial moment, she found herself thinking "this way I can tell him the baby's his" – and when she realised that was what she was thinking she was repelled. Sick to her

stomach with herself.'

Again she looked at him with sorrow and concern.

'It's not as if something like that would have worked in any case, what with the time-factor and any number of other reasons – but the fact that, uh, Professor Summerfield could even think such a thing made her feel... I don't know, made her feel unclean and worthless inside. She wasn't hating you, at that moment It wasn't about hating you.'

'Well, you know,' said Jason. 'Everybody gets nasty little thoughts like that sometimes. Different nasty little thoughts for different situations, I mean, and the different people involved. It's what you do with them in the end that counts, I suppose. And I think we've pushed the let's-pretend-we're-strangers game as far as it will go, now.'

'I suppose so.' Benny gazed rather mournfully at her non-alcoholic drink. 'Oh dear Goddess, what a complete and utter mess. This isn't how I thought things would work out at all.'

Jason smiled a little, despite himself. 'I don't think, sometimes, they ever do. We just don't seem to be living in the kind of stories that resolve themselves. We're living in a bleeding soap opera. Something's always coming up, and I have an idea that you're gonna have to start a whole new diary for this one...'

About the Author

Dave Stone yadda-yadda stuff thing, *Armitage*, yadda-yadda, *Doctor Who*, rhubarb-rhubarb *Sky Pirates*, yadda-yadda, *Heart of TARDIS*, yadda *The Slow Empire* simultaneously, yadda-yadda yadda. In his spare time Mr Stone is the Chair for Synochrastic-related Effulgence in the Bide-a-wee Home for Distressed Gentlefolk who are Bonkers in the Nut.

"Before Lara Craft took her first leap, there was Bernice Summerfield, blazing the trail that the others would follow..."

DOCTOR WHO MAGAZINE



THE INFERNAL NEXUS

A new novel by
DAVE STONE

Acting on an abstruse tip-off from the renowned parapsychologist Dr Rupert Gilhooly, a man who, like, knows a lot of stuff! one Bernice Summerfield has found herself on a probe-ship heading deep into the Problematic Heart of the galaxy - not knowing what, or quite who, she might find.

What she finds is Station Control. A place that exists, simultaneously, in four hundred and seventeen dimensions, a brawling, souk-like Nexus between every world that can, or has or ever will be.
And one of those dimensions is Hell.

Bernice knows nothing of the rivalries and power-plays going on here. So she blunders right into them and makes a complete hash of everything, natch. And one of the particular whoms she finds, quite frankly, what with one thing and another, she could quite well do without. In her current state.



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